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# Jews of the Dutch Caribbean

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Exploring ethnic identity on Curaçao

Alan F. Benjamin



London and New York

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*Jews of the Dutch Caribbean* addresses identity and ethnicity, through a detailed study of a little-known group of Jews in Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles, with an intriguing history. It asks readers to take a broad perspective on the contexts that play a role in ethnicity – including, for example, ecology, history, kinship, commerce, and language use in everyday life and, crucially, rituals. Each chapter includes an extensive description of a selected ritual practice, either sacred or secular, in order to illustrate its theme. Finally the author conducts a reflective inquiry into the research ethics of anthropologists. Benjamin suggests that field-work is relational as much as scientific, involving subjectivity, power differences and trust.

In this fascinating study, ethnic identity is treated as fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed. As such it draws on ethnographic research to extrapolate about ethnic identity generally, to look at how it is shaped and negotiated. Benjamin takes a broad and innovative perspective, presenting ethnic identity as a local as well as a transnational phenomenon, shaped by history and re-shaped through contemporary, everyday interactions. Drawing on work among members of the two Jewish congregations in Curaçao, the author suggests that people construct cognitive, metaphoric maps of the different ethnic groups perceived to exist in the region in which they live. These ‘mapped’ identities are recognizable through a variety of markers, which are applied to individuals and ethnic groups. Ethnic markers and boundaries are shaped by culture and experience, and often correspond to political-economic relations and differences in status and power.

**Alan F. Benjamin** is a Research Associate with the Population Research Institute of the Pennsylvania State University, where his interests include Jewish identity and welfare policy.



*Frontispiece* A floating market operates daily in Punda, with produce from Venezuela brought to Curaçao in small boats. With its semi-arid environment, Curaçao does not grow many crops. Instead, its economy has developed from its port.

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## Preface

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This book is about how people draw lines between themselves and others. Specifically, it is about two communities of Jews in Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles. My hope, though, is that the boundary-drawing processes discussed will be thought to be applicable to many people. At the root of what I argue is that how we draw these lines is shaped by our history in a particular place, continually changing, and expressed in different ways.

Growing up Jewish in a midwestern city in the United States, the themes of social boundaries and social affiliations – their meanings and their consequences – long have occupied my thoughts. In what sense was I Jewish and in what sense American? How would that affect my friendships and whom I could date? In what ways was I different from others and in what ways alike? In what ways were difference and similarity displayed?

I wondered, for example, what Jews thought about Christmas and what we were “supposed” to do on that day. Most of our regular options were not available. Stores and libraries were closed. Friends were otherwise occupied. What was a Jew to do when there was no special ritual, nor any regular, secular activity in which to spend the day? Christmas was a day during which one might feel different from people with whom one normally felt quite similar. My friends were doing things with their families. As a child, I thought they were gathering to engage in private, familial activities that I never would understand and in which I never would share. What, I wondered, did they tell each other? What insights did they acquire by participating in the experience? How did it affect relationships between the members of those families, and their relationships with Jews? A major thrust of this volume is that drawing social boundaries permeates experience in similarly pervasive – and similarly trivial – ways for many people in any large, sub-divided social group or nation. How we distinguish ourselves from others and how we affiliate with others – the social boundaries that we draw – affect us in many ways.

Social boundaries may affect one’s sense of right and wrong. The unthinkable terror of the Holocaust of Jews in Europe during World War II did not affect any of my near relatives – it was personally distant. However, it was a presence in my life, a presence that needed to be interpreted. How would, and how should, it affect my personal decisions? The social boundary between Jews and non-Jews that the

Holocaust emphasized affects relations between Jews and non-Jews today. I am no exception. Who is to be trusted? Who is to be feared? In the wake of the Holocaust, some people fight against the discrimination or stereotyping of other groups, while others fight to strengthen the power of their own group. Some people attempt to increase the “permeability” of social boundaries, the degree to which people are seen as alike rather than as members of a particular social group. These people emphasize what is universally human. On the other hand, some attempt to increase the “ordering” function of social boundaries, the degree to which people are seen as different. These people may be attempting to preserve and protect proud traditions specific to a particular social group.

From one minute to the next in our daily lives, and over the course of lifetimes, we traverse moments of encounter with others. Underlying each such moment is, for example, the panoply of historical relations between our ancestors, our parents’ incomes, our comparative heights, and how we slept the night before (Desjarlais and O’Neill 1999). An intrinsic part of each such encounter, too, is a process of drawing, re-drawing, interpreting, misinterpreting, and struggling over social boundaries. Oftentimes, a simple “hello” or “goodbye” reflects much more than a dictionary would suggest. These utterances – and other, more complex interactions – also are statements to one another of who we are. They include assertions of identity, among other things. Assertions about identity are inherent in our social encounters.

Identity may be discussed in numerous ways. In this volume, it is discussed primarily as something like a mental map of the social boundaries that matter to a person and to people in a particular place. To continue the cartographic metaphor, these mental, or cognitive maps of identity may be topographic or political – that is, they may refer to the features or to the organization of a social group. The maps may include transparencies, one above another, that enrich and refine the distinctions made between identities – that add layers of meaning, and complicate any one-to-one correspondences between identities. The transparencies may be added or removed, singly or in part, in accordance with the interests of those reading the maps. That is, not every identity will matter or be reflected in every encounter. People select and read from different maps of identity and dispute cartographic accuracy. Maps produced in earlier periods will remain in use by some, and others will employ newer maps. Some maps will be distributed more widely among a group of people than others – i.e., found in publications that are more popular, or shared by more people. Wider distribution will reflect the interests of elites at times. A general trend is that people will tend to use maps passed down in families, rather than unfamiliar maps. In other words, many people will tend to think about social boundaries in ways much like others in their family have done. New information will lead some people to re-draw their maps, while others will not.

Why all this focus on maps? Because the notions that we carry around about social boundaries form a little-examined pattern of thought that shapes our lives and our social encounters; the lines that we “draw” help us to locate ourselves in relation to others and others in relation to one another. These lines denote

differences that matter to us. They shape, for example, who one might consider superior or inferior; who, friend or foe; and who might be a suitable mate or business partner. These lines denote identity. As such, they might shape from whom one is willing to learn, or to whom one extends a helping hand – whose distress merits compassion, whose merely scorn. The shared lines that people draw between social groups matter. This book is about some of the processes through which such lines are drawn.

In discussing these processes, I use an approach that is holistic and contextualized. Research into any theme in human life – such as ethnic identity – requires understanding the background in which that pattern of behavior is occurring. Studying specific behaviors or topics – for example, looking at participation in religious services or at marriage rates in and of themselves – without attempting a broader understanding of the contexts in which those behaviors occur will limit our understanding of the patterns we find. Patterns and processes occur in specific contexts. People's experiences and interpretations of those patterns and processes inspire the behaviors that produce them. To understand human behavior, one must look at the context within which that behavior was produced, including the meanings people ascribe to it. This is one of the strengths of ethnography.

Having at its root a narrative and descriptive approach, ethnography is well suited to capture context in a way that other research approaches cannot. Anthropological ethnography often includes information from a variety of layers and realms – about types of information whose connection with the topic may not be apparent immediately. These might include, for example, information about climate or habitat. The anthropological notion of ethnography is that the human context is wide indeed; the factors shaping our lives are broad.

This is a book about social boundaries and ethnic identity, and about the context in which some ethnic identities occur. People's lives are full, rich, and affected through multiple processes. Social relations, such as manifestations of ethnic identity, have multiple layers of meaning and explanation. In this volume, I attempt to actualize this notion by describing the people I studied holistically, portraying many of the different kinds of factors that influence people's lives, and translating that context and those lives to readers who live in other contexts.

## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

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### Romeo and Juliet

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;  
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,  
Take all myself.

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II, ii, 38–49)

Romeo and Juliet are doomed because they fail to recognize the depth to which their Montague and Capulet identities *are* who they are, and because until their deaths, their families, the Montagues and Capulets, classify each other as enemies. Juliet is unable to recognize that the classification of groups of people into social categories is embedded in social practice; it is built into the existing web of political, economic, and cultural relations, and rests on the history of those relations. Romeo the person will not be able to change his Montague identity. At the early stage of the play from which the above quote is drawn, Juliet and Romeo do not realize the extent to which Montague–Capulet social relations have been ingrained in them – the extent to which they are socialized into seeing the world as a place divided into friend and foe.

Juliet *does* recognize the following distinction: Romeo the person is not the same as Romeo's social identity. Romeo the thinking, feeling, acting *being* could have been *named* otherwise. Similarly, the Montague name could have been other. Juliet recognizes that regardless of personal attributes, people are *classified* into named

groupings. In this process, social classifications are thought to distinguish significantly-different groups of people from one another. The categories thus constructed are thought to refer to qualitatively distinctive social entities, to a taxonomy of human groupings. In *Romeo and Juliet*'s case, the two social groupings are thought to differ significantly from one another, thereby producing a cultural boundary inhibiting exogamy, inhibiting marriage across group lines. Romeo's social identity marks him as an enemy of Juliet's kin.

Juliet bemoans this dominance of category over individual characteristics. Indeed, this is a major point of the play. Shakespeare does not name the play *Montagues and Capulets*. Shakespeare does not name the play after the kin-based collectivities involved in the story. Rather, he names it after two individuals who live and die in historical time. Kin-based collectivities are ahistorical, or "timeless," and that which is timeless cannot be tragic. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare may be attempting to convey the tragedy experienced by each person whose life is restricted, altered, or diminished by being classified as "merely" one more member of a particular social identity.

Discussing *Romeo and Juliet* reminds me of a story I heard during my visit to Curaçao. I hesitate to mention it, because to me it seems almost too magical to be true. Indeed, when I first heard the story I tended to discount it. I thought, maybe something like this happened, but it sounded so mythical that I wondered in what ways, and for what purpose the version I heard had been embellished. The several people who mentioned the story to me as it came up in informal conversations told it with an interesting mix of wonder and casualness. They recognized the wonder of the events, but the "ending" was recent. The protagonists of the story were still alive and living in Curaçao. The narrators continued to interact on a day-to-day basis with the central figures of the story. In retrospect, I now realize that on one level it must have seemed absurd to the narrators to present the protagonists as mythical figures – as a modern *Romeo and Juliet* – when so many mundane details of the figures' lives were common knowledge. To use a bit of hyperbole, only with difficulty could these apparently ordinary humans, these mythical heroes, be understood to live and walk among mere mortals.

Eight months after my arrival, during a routine interview, I heard the story firsthand. To my surprise, the version the couple told about themselves was no different than what others had told about them, except that some details were added. The couple told their tale in a matter-of-fact manner. To them it was an account of familiar lives, not an exceptional incident. They did recognize, however, that their lives could seem like a fairy tale, and appeared a bit embarrassed by such an analogy, which was left unexplored in our interview.

In bare bones, and not using their real names, the story is this. An Ashkenazi Jewish woman, Hannah, and a non-Jewish man who descended from Sephardi Jews, Robert, fell in love as teenagers. Their relationship was discouraged strongly, particularly by the woman's parents. Her parents understood Jewish endogamy to be of central importance because – in a position often described as "traditional" –

only marriage between Jews ensures the future of the Jewish people. Two reasons for this position are that socialization as a Jew depends on both parents being Jewish, and because recognition as a Jew by other Jews depends on one's mother being Jewish. Thus, the couple separated. Each married another and moved to a different country, one to the Netherlands, and the other to Canada. The woman married a Jew, in a traditional ceremony. The man had a son, and the woman had no children. They each led their own lives. Then, each of them divorced and met by chance while back in Curaçao. Their love for each other was rekindled. The man converted to Judaism under the supervision of the rabbi of the Sephardi congregation of Curaçao. The two were wed in the historic, elegant, and inspiring Sephardi synagogue of Curaçao, the *Snoa*. Now they have two children as a couple and share the management of a business. Moreover, they also share an active participation in the Ashkenazi synagogue of Curaçao, where the man is President of the Board of Directors (the *Direktiva*) and the woman chairs the Ladies Committee.

The parallel with Romeo and Juliet is apparent. Each couple is separated by elder kin due to differences in identity, in name, between classifications of social groupings. Romeo is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet. Hannah is a Jew and Robert is a non-Jew. The moral of the Curaçao story, however, differs from Shakespeare's. In the Curaçaoan-Jewish narrative, the lovers' obedience results in satisfying lives. In time, their willingness to defer to community norms is rewarded. On the other hand, Romeo and Juliet's secret disobedience – though religiously sanctioned – ends in death. The youthful Curaçaoan couple respected the traditions and the wishes of their parents. Then, when more mature and once again available, their love for each other returned – precisely when they returned to Curaçao, their birthplace and spatial-national center, their home. Curaçao is a place where Jew, non-Jew, and Sephardi are significant classifications, and where the couple's love flourishes. This Curaçaoan-Jewish romantic drama, unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, teaches that love may cross at least some social classifications and – as they both participate actively in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi segments of the Jewish community – that love flourishes when lovers are steeped in community involvement and conform to community traditions. In this drama the dominance of category over individual characteristics results in satisfying lives, not tragedy. I will return to the comparison with *Romeo and Juliet* in subsequent chapters. It has several additional nuances relevant to the topic of ethnic identity.

My interest in these questions stems from long fascination with people who are apparently similar and yet at times are profoundly different. I wonder how people who wear the same kinds of clothes, eat the same food – work, and play, and study alongside me – can interpret events so differently. Some differences are minor; some are like chasms between us. I am frequently amazed, in awe of, and frightened by someone else's unexpected – to me – reaction, opinion, or passion. I ask, "How does that other person understand the world?" Our cognitive models, cultural understandings, and embodied practice often seem so alike, so patterned and regular. Yet, our variations remain, and remain significant. Our differences are



socially and culturally organized in ways that shape, but sometimes defy, experiences of similarity.

### Introductory overview

This research explores one kind of meaning and meaning-making: the classifying of oneself and of others into the collective social identities often termed “ethnic identities.” It is a study of the process of coalescing and cleaving into perceived collectivities by people in interaction with each other and with powerful social and cultural forces.

The ethnographic research on which this work is based was conducted among both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews living in Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles – a former Dutch colony in the southern Caribbean (see Chapter 4). There have been Sephardi Jews in Curaçao since 1651 (see Chapter 6). Currently they worship in the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in the western hemisphere, the *Snoa*. Other than the occasional individual, Ashkenazi Jews arrived in Curaçao from Eastern Europe largely in the 1920s and 1930s (see Chapter 8). Like the Sephardi, they were fleeing persecution and seeking opportunity.

Shakespeare presents a concept instructive in discussions of ethnicity and identity: the taken-for-granted, shaping power of ethnic identities. Similarly, ethnic identity among Jews of Curaçao *seems* natural and timeless. Their ethnic identity appears to provide Curaçaoan Jews with a feeling of belonging, and with a sense of order, place, and history. However, I argue that ethnic identity among Jews of Curaçao is, in addition, a layered, shifting, and negotiated naming process in which ethnic “nodes” are produced. By nodes I refer both to groupings of people deemed to share ethnic identities, and to the signifiers or markers understood to index these groupings. Thus, their ethnic identities are historically contingent products of human activity. Ethnic identities are (re)constructed as narratives from the political–economic–cultural facts and fictions of history told in contemporary settings by people in social groups performing changing roles within particular national–political–economic–cultural–ecological contexts.

Ethnic identity has a performative aspect to it. It is expressed and witnessed, manifested and inscribed through “classifying practices” – practices through which people are classified into social groupings by those in the social milieu. These practices are complex. A particular marker, such as a style of dress, may indicate one’s ethnicity at some times but not at others; it sometimes may refer to Sephardi Jews in particular, for example, while at other times it may refer, say, to middle-class Curaçaoans in general. In addition, such markers will be “read” differently – sometimes varying by person, sometimes varying by the setting or the circumstances of the encounter. Sometimes the meanings attributed to a particular marker will reflect differences in power and sometimes those meanings and the associated differences in power will be contested. Much of the time, these varying interpretations will be going on simultaneously. In any case, they also will be rooted in the local social history. Such are classifying practices.

Jews of Curaçao construct their own and others' ethnic identities out of disputed ethnic boundaries. Sometimes this has been done to take on a new ethnic identity and sometimes, in varying settings, to foreground one identity out of the gestalt of possible ethnic identities. Ethnic identities may be understood to be ever-changing though partially enduring products of local social relations – both historical and contemporary – constructed into and by behavioral conventions, indicated by particular labels, socially reproduced, and realized in practice. However, ethnic identities also are “real” in the sense that this confluence of forces that produces them is pervasive and powerful.

The sum of ethnic identities in a particular region is a kind of model – a social “map” – of the distinctions people make between themselves and others in that region. Ethnic identities are the product of ethnotheories of social space, which derive from local understandings of the social landscape. Social processes in regard to ethnic differences shape the culturally constructed “maps” – the cultural models (Holland and Quinn 1987) – through which signifying practices come to mark one group of people from another through everyday “symbolic interaction” (Goffman 1963).

In a public address, a member of the Board of Directors of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel described a characteristic behavior of members of the congregation as being “in the blood.” His statement is typical of popular understandings of ethnicity, on Curaçao and elsewhere. I will challenge this view of ethnic identity as a fixed, inherited trait embodied in all members of an ethnic group for the duration of each person's lifetime.

In this work I intend to challenge several notions. Some are scholarly notions, some are popular understandings, and some overlap to varying degrees. Eight notions are contested here:

- The idea that ethnic identity is inherited genetically – that it is passed down “in the blood” (e.g., the statement of the member of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel mentioned above).
- The idea that one's ethnic identity is an “internal” – psychological or genetic – matter, having nothing to do with the social setting within which one is found (e.g., that it is a misrecognition of one's social relations).
- The contrary idea that ethnic identity is wholly constructed, or merely an artifact of power relations (e.g., the notion that Lumbee Indians never existed as a tribe and are claiming a tribal identity in order to obtain benefits from the United States government [Blu 1980]).
- The notion that ethnic identity is *constant*, and may not be changed (e.g., the attitude among Jews discussed by Zenner and Deshen [1982], cited below [see p.10]).
- The ideas that ethnic identity is *unitary* – that one can have only one ethnic identity, be a member of only one ethnic group (e.g., the laws of racial miscegenation in the United States that declared as “negro” any child with one parent of African descent, whatever the descent of the other parent).

- The idea that ethnic identity is *singular* – uniquely discriminating those so identified from people ethnically identified in any other way (e.g., that the “Black Jews” of Ethiopia are unlike and completely different from all other Ethiopians).
- The idea that being a Jew is merely a matter of religious belief and practice (a notion often held by “fundamentalist” Jews).
- The idea that one’s religious beliefs and practices are divorced from one’s social, non-religious identity (e.g., as advocated by the founders of Reform Judaism, who argued that they were Germans during the week and Jews only when in synagogue).

The concepts of constancy, uniqueness, and singularity will be revisited repeatedly in this work.

## Significations of “ethnic”

The English word “ethnic” seems to have two relevant significations at its root. On the one hand, it has become the English language translation of the Hebrew word *goy* (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:V:423–424), meaning a people or nation that is not Jewish. This signification, when translated by English-speaking *goyim* (plural of *goy*), has been transformed to mean, whether as adjective or noun, a nation or people that is other – not Christian or not Jewish. An irony is that as a result of historical linguistic changes, being a *goy* (of an “other” ethnic identity) for some now refers to Jews – that is, to the people who coined the word *goy* in order to refer to non-Jews. Second, “ethnic” signifies a heathen or a pagan. In fact, the English word “heathen” is thought to be a corruption of “ethnic.”

The two above significations are connected through Greek editions of the New Testament, the second part of the Christian Bible, which uses *ethnos* for the word *goy*. In the New Testament, “ethnics” are groups of people who are “not us” and who may not “fear God” as we do. An ethnic came to mean one who both is not Christian (in the social sense) and does not believe in Christ (in the cosmological sense). For example (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:V:424), Allen writes in 1588 (*Admonitions* 37), “Yf he ... heare not the Church, let him be taken for an Ethnike”; Ben Johnson writes in 1625 (*Staple of N.* II.iv), “A kind of Mule! That’s half an Ethnick, half a Christian”; and Sir T. Herbert writes in 1634 (*Trav.* 195), “The Religion of the Peguans is Ethnicall, knowing many but false Gods.” Allen’s ethnic does not believe in Christ; Johnson’s ethnic has a non-Christian social identity; and Herbert’s ethnic combines both features.

In more contemporary times, “ethnic” becomes a “polite term,” as in (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:V:424), “The former ‘ethnics,’ a polite term for Jews, Italians, and other lesser breeds just inside the law” (*The Times Literary Supplement* 17 November 1961:828/4). Yet, ethnicity has become an ostensibly neutral way to describe social groups. For example, Berreman (1988) argues that studying “ethnic stratification” is a neutral way to describe ascriptive rankings of social groups. In

addition, ethnicity is employed by some evolutionary theorists to indicate that there is a cultural basis for differences between human groups, thus to disclaim genetic or racial bases for human difference. In this instance, the concept of ethnicity is understood to be less stigmatizing. For example, Huxley and Haddon, in *We Europeans* (1935:iv.136) write:

Nowhere does a human group now exist which corresponds closely to a systematic sub-species in animals, since various original sub-species have crossed repeatedly and constantly. For existing populations, the noncommittal term *ethnic group* should be used.

(*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:V:424, emphasis in original)

Huxley and Haddon close an interesting etymological circle, for they assert that Jews “form the best-known example” of an ethnic group (*We Europeans* 1935:vi.181). Once an “ethnic” was a *goy*, a non-Jew. Now Jews – to Huxley and Haddon – are the ethnics.

However, in practice the term “ethnic” is not used in entirely neutral ways. At times, use of the term “ethnic” functions as a subtle referent to those who are understood to require a “special” designation in order to distinguish them from those who are understood to lack ethnic identity – who are understood to constitute the “norm,” possibly because of their relatively high status and power. Sometimes those considered – by the general public and occasionally by researchers – to be “other” are thought, “harmlessly,” to be foreign or exotic. At other times, however, “ethnic” remains a term used to promote the superiority of one’s own collectivity. In this latter case, “ethnics” are thought to be “lesser breeds.” Unfortunately, this latter understanding has become more salient, even among researchers. Studies of “ethnic peoples” now sometimes contain a disguised, maybe unintended, message that one is attempting to explain the “failings” of ethnic groups – for example, to explain rates of teenage pregnancy or school dropout among an “ethnic” group. Such research denigrates the members of such “ethnic” groups by implicitly – or not – phrasing the issues as questioning why “ethnics” are not, for example, smarter, more successful, cleaner, more diligent, etc.

Another trend in the use of the term “ethnicity” – particularly in the sphere of political and popular discourse – buttresses a clarion call for rights, recognition, or power. Demands for “distributive justice,” for political independence, for a variety of cultural, legal, and economic adjustments draw upon ethnicity for legitimization. Despite this, ethnicity remains a less value-laden term than many racial, religious, national, and regional labels.

The most widespread current understanding is that “ethnic” refers to any group of people who share racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, especially when found within a larger social system (paraphrased from *Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:V:424, meaning 2.b). The sense of “otherness” may have attenuated, but it persists. “Ethnic” may be used with positive regard to describe a group,

but as “ethnic” groups usually are part of larger social groupings, popular usage of “ethnic” continues to possess connotations of stigma, as well.

### **Anthropological approaches to the study of ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a problematic term, defined in a number of ways and studied from a variety of perspectives. Four major approaches are outlined below, but the primary advantage of using ethnicity as an organizing construct was pointed out by Cohen (1978), who argues that studying ethnicity allows anthropologists to study relations between groupings of people rather than regarding each social group as an isolated unit of analysis. Studying ethnicity enables researchers to focus on the boundaries between social groupings.

Early anthropological approaches to ethnicity sought to substitute culture for race. For example, Boas (1940:247–248) writes:

... it is an exceedingly precarious task to distinguish between what is determined by the biological make-up of the body and what depends upon external conditions. Observations made on masses of individuals in different localities may be explained equally well by the assumption of hereditary racial characteristics and by that of changes due to environmental influences ... . Different types, areas, social strata and cultures exhibit marked differences in physiological and mental function. *A dogmatic assertion that racial type alone is responsible for these differences is a pseudo-science.* An adequate treatment requires a weighing of the diverse factors. [my emphasis]

Particularism and cultural relativity – the cultural “environment” – were held to constitute a more objective, rational, and just hermeneutic toward the many peoples encountered by Europeans in post-Columbian voyages.

Barth (1969) was the most influential voice of a second generation of work in ethnicity. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969), he focuses on the boundaries between ethnic groups. Barth shifts the emphasis from intra-group social organization, customs, and traditions to the dynamics between ethnic groups. He views ethnic groups as categories of self-ascription and ascription by others that correspond to particular social and ecological niches. He is interested in the movement of individuals from one ethnic group to another, in the shifting ethnic allegiances of ethnic sub-populations, and in the changes of whole ethnic groups from one identity to another over time.

After Barth, a major interest of anthropologists oriented toward ethnic studies has been the material and ideological conditions, usually within nation-states, involved in the construction of ethnic hierarchies. Williams’ review article (1989) is a good example of this trend. She focuses on hegemonic practices of politico-economic domination within nation-states. Once again a concern with justice, this time distributive justice, seems to underlie studies of ethnicity. Williams argues that elites encourage ethnic diversity and dissension within a nation-state in order

to maintain their power within the nation-state political economy. Defining conflicts within a nation-state as disputes between ethnic groups historically ranked hierarchically serves to maintain the high-status positions of elites. It redirects struggles for power away from elites and between those with relatively little power, thus helping to preserve elites' statuses at the top of the social order.

A fourth recent trend (e.g., Bentley 1987) draws on practice theory as put forward by Bourdieu (1977). Along with an interest in power differentials, the "ethnicity and practice" approach suggested by Bentley attempts to relocate the role of individuals in ethnic-related activity and to reinscribe individuals in ethnic-oriented ethnographies. That is, while focusing on ethnic groupings, Bentley is interested in individual processes, as well. He examines the power that an ethnic identity has in one's life: "The theory of practice accounts ... for the sense of compulsion that attaches to ethnic identities" (Bentley 1987:48). In this framework, actors need not recognize motives; rather, motives are produced unknowingly through socialization – through and into "habitus" – and serve to maintain social structure and hierarchies of power, regardless of individual manipulations of the symbols of ethnic identity.

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a continuing form of social identification that is persistently meaningful for groups of persons, even though the specific cultural features by which an ethnic group is defined may alter over time and space. Ethnicity may be characterized as "a division 'in culture,'" as opposed to a division "in nature" (Blu 1980:205). Robert E. Daniels (personal communication) describes ethnicity as "the claim that we do not share commonalities." At the root of ethnicity are distinctions between self and other. Ethnicity, as understood among current anthropologists, is an approach that inherently is relational.

Ethnicity commonly is used to "name" a group of people found among or in close proximity to other social collectivities. It is "situated" in the context of plurality. One's potential ethnic identities often seem to be shaped by the ethnic groups present either in the area in which one lives or in one's and others' awareness.

The phenomenon of ethnicity has to do with human social groupings. The practice of ethnic naming usually is applied to people of a certain race, national origin, or religion, though it may allude to a person's "tribe," region, or economic or ecological niche. On occasion ethnicity is used as a substitute for class. In each of these instances, ethnicity is a way of looking at social systems that contrasts one social grouping to another.

The ethnicity of a particular person may change to varying degrees (Blu 1980). One may convert to a different religion, marry someone from a different religion, be the child of parents with different ethnic backgrounds, or migrate to a different country or region. Each such behavior alters one's social position in some way; it

changes the “place” one occupies in relation to others. As such, one’s ethnicity is not immutable or constant.

In addition, individuals in ethnic groups have raped or been raped, have been exchanged as wives, and have been taken as slaves by members of other ethnic groups; in a variety of such practices, supposedly “ethnic” gene pools are altered. The children of such terrible actions may be considered to be members of either parent’s ethnic group, or of neither. In either case, the ethnic “bloodline” no longer is “pure.” As these events have happened regularly throughout human history, considering any human ethnic group to be genetically homogenous reflects flawed reasoning. Ethnicity does not fully correspond to genetic attributes, and the actual genetic make-up of any ethnic group will change over time. The point is that ethnicity changes genetically, as well.

Yet, among many in the general public, an “ethnic” person is thought to be a member of only one, single ethnic group. Concerning Jewish societies in particular, Zenner and Deshen (1982:8) write:

It is characteristic of traditional Jewry, and of traditional societies generally, not to admit to the fact of change, to be virtually unaware of it. So that while Jews everywhere mutated their culture and religion along with the vicissitudes of their varying existential situations, they always deemed their particular variant of Judaism to be authentic and legitimate. The realization that things do actually change, and, more, the claim that change is legitimate, is by and large foreign to traditional Jewry. This conception of cultural reality enabled gradual changes to occur painlessly, but at the same time, it also stymied radical breaks with the past.

The approach taken in this work focuses on the socially situated, the classifying aspect of ethnic identity. Though drawing on elements found in the anthropological trends in the study of ethnicity, in this work I consider ethnic identity rather than ethnicity, describing ethnic identities as constructed through classifying practices. In other words, I focus on the perceived boundaries and on the processes in which naming practices are applied to social groupings rather than on ethnicity as an essential phenomenon, in and of itself. Yet, drawing on Blu’s (1980) approach to the study of ethnicity through the study of ethnic identity, I also suggest that studying ethnic identity tells us something about the people being studied. The practices and understandings of those who are associated with a particular ethnic identity reflect their experiences as well as their relations with other social groupings. Thus, I describe a ceremonial ritual in each chapter in order to depict and to imply the character of collective experience.

Ethnic identity is textured, layered, and changing. Many of the distinctions made between ethnicities depend on the degree to which one marker or another – and one ethnic group or another – is foregrounded. That is, they depend on awareness and on the attention paid to ethnic markers and boundaries in the course of everyday life. These change as one places in the foreground differing



understandings about social boundaries or finds oneself in differing situations. Cohen (1978:387) defines ethnicity “as a *series* of nesting dichotomizations of inclusiveness and exclusiveness” [emphasis in original]. My claim here is that the lines drawn between ethnic identities, the dichotomizations, derive from one’s knowledge of local social groupings. The series of dichotomizations sometimes is expanded to include non-local social groupings – it may expand beyond one’s local region, depending on the awareness of additional possible ethnic identities. Ethnic identity is the result of a “simple” process of collective and personal differentiations made between *us* and *them* (e.g., Lakoff 1987). On the other hand, “locating” ethnic identity is elusive and complicated, involving shifting understandings, experiences, and social relations.

## Identity and ethnic identity

One’s name(s)/identity(ies) differentiates one from other individuals, and one’s group’s name(s) differentiates one’s group from other groups. Studies of identity, thus, fundamentally are studies of how people classify and categorize themselves in relation to others. In this sense, identity is cognitive; it has to do with how people think. Identity is a “label”, a “name” by which to discriminate between objects. One either has that name or has another name. Identity signifies both sameness with others and distinctiveness from others. Identity refers both to individuals and to groups, and implies continuity through time (Jacobson-Widding 1983:13) – though in practice it often is transient.

My use of ethnic identity closely parallels Shaw’s, who writes (1994:84):

Identity in this article is a “signifying practice” and refers to people’s use of a range of sign vehicles in an ongoing process of communication that is both intrapersonal and interpersonal and that simultaneously serves both psychological and social functions ... although identity systems “work” ... to permit individuals to adapt public cultural meanings to their personal needs and desires, they also function to characterize selves in a way that makes them intelligible to others. Identity symbols and signs thus signal loyalty and solidarity to a particular community in a particular status domain ... and communicate this “situatedness” to others as relevant context for the interpretation of a person’s motives and goals.

Ethnic identities – and “systems” of ethnic identities – are shaped by the cultural understandings and social relations of local social collectivities. Identities are “situated” and contingent, dependent on local systems of power and meaning. In addition, ethnic identities serve a semiotic function as a symbol that represents and serves to distinguish groupings of people from one another. Ethnic identities are markers of locally significant social categories.

There has been considerable variety in research into identity (e.g., Fogelson 1982; Robbins 1973; Skinner 1990). In the work of people such as Erik Erikson,



Carl Rogers, and Harry Stack Sullivan, identity is a psychodynamic phenomenon. It is viewed as a consistent, subjective phenomenon which, if interfered with, may develop to be dysfunctional, pathological, or inappropriate. Identity constancy, however, is one of the themes I dispute.

The cognitive processes by which identities are “made” and distinguished are inherently social, that is, they are situated in and shaped by social relations and cultural understandings. To consider the cognitive, classifying basis of identity, one might draw on the concepts of gestalt psychology. Kurt Lewin (Herman 1989) posited a basic “need” to belong. Gestalt psychologists argue that sensory and social attention to objects varies according to whether an object is in one’s perceptual foreground or background. Perception is limited and selective, and one experiences a sense of “belonging” with objects perceived to be in one’s foreground. Thus, the social or ethnic group – an “object” attended to selectively – which is foregrounded would meet one’s “need” to belong, and would be understood to constitute one’s “identity.”

Another cognitive, classifying basis for identity is seen in the works of Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas (Fogelson 1982). Levi-Strauss argues that all humans divide and classify, and Douglas that all humans “order” their worlds. By separating and distinguishing, finding similarities and differences, one constructs identities.

Due to disciplinary divisions, studies of the cognitive, classifying processes contributing to identity-making often are not synthesized as well as they might be. A sense of boundedness as individuals and as groups may contribute to the perception that some objects – some identities – are “closer” to one’s own or to one’s group’s boundary than others. Ethnic identity is at least partly a psychocultural and psychosocial construction. One acquires and is ascribed “ethnic names” designated by association with the cultural productions deemed relevant to ethnicity in a specific context and attended to, in part, according to one’s psychological-cognitive processing. In addition, ethnic identities are specific to the historical and contemporary social relations of a particular region.

Identity-making is a process of classifying, and thereby determining the relations of a subject with other exemplars of the phenomenon to be classified. There are two ways to characterize a unit of classification: by its own traits, or by traits that distinguish the unit from other, like units. In the former case, one looks for essential characteristics that make the identity fundamentally what it is. The unit is thought *to be*; its “beingness” needs only to be described. In the latter case, one focuses on the “boundaries” between one unit and another. Traits become secondary to the dynamics and to the relations between units. In this work I describe elements that contribute to what is a Jew in Curaçao, but I do not argue that those elements constitute any fundamental or permanent “essence.” Instead, I submit that there do, indeed, exist factors that shape who we are, but that the contemporary skein of social relations – the dynamics on the boundaries of social groupings – is critically important in determining how we group ourselves and others socially.

Though sharing some features with other types of collective identity, such as

gender, race, and class, ethnic identity may be distinguished from them. The distinctions primarily are of two types, and are a matter of degree rather than of absolute difference.

First, people sharing an ethnic identity may have social relationships based on kinship, residency, subsistence, or religion. Obviously, not all members of an ethnic group are kin to one another, but the ties of kinship that do exist within an ethnic group are likely to follow the boundaries of ethnic identities, and marriages often occur within the understood boundaries of ethnic groups. Members of extended families often are considered to share the same ethnic identity. Similarly, members of the same ethnic grouping oftentimes live near each other, in some degree of contiguity. Specific neighborhoods and regions come to be associated with a particular group. Members of the same ethnic grouping also may organize their households or place of residence similarly. There may be patterns in the way in which newlyweds tend to form new households, while in other places they may live with one or the other set of parents, for example. In addition, a particular set of subsistence practices may be shared widely by members of a particular ethnic group, be it a particular type of craft, crop domestication, or retail goods sold. Also, people with the same ethnic identity may practice the same religion. Other types of factors may be widespread among members of the same ethnic grouping, such as perceived physiognomic distinctions, language, history, anticipated destiny, and other types of social organization, such as political organization. The greater the number of such aspects of social life that are perceived to be shared widely among those understood to constitute a social collectivity, the more likely the collectivity is to constitute what is socially and analytically considered an ethnic group.

Second, ethnic identities are distinguishable from other collective social identities by the types, variety, and widespread use of metaphors that describe and promote both social solidarity within the ethnic grouping, and differentiation from other ethnic groupings. Ethnic collectivities are bound together through metaphors of connectivity – particularly the three metaphors “of blood, bed, and cult” (Nash 1989:124). Ethnic groups employ as metaphors the ties of family, household, and religion to depict their connections. Metaphors of kinship may include descent reckoning based on religious origin stories, such as the notion that all Jews descend from the Biblical figures, Abraham and Sarah. Such metaphoric discourse often frames the subjectivities of the collectivities of people understood to have particular ethnic identities.

### **Classifying practices of ethnic identity**

People who live in particular locales, with particular ecologies, histories, and social relations, make labeled differentiations in regard to ethnicity. People in these specific contexts learn a local knowledge that includes the perceived significant distinctions between collectivities of people, how those distinctions are marked or indexed, and the relations among these understood-to-be-distinctive social groupings.

However, each member of the social grouping in which these characteristics are understood to be distinctive will not possess all of the characteristics that are understood to index social groupings. Indeed, the chances are prohibitive that any one person will possess each of the traits associated with a particular group. Moreover, those traits possessed by one perceived to have a particular ethnic identity often will be possessed temporarily or in limited ways. For example, not all Jews are good at business – a trait sometimes associated with Jews, often with pejorative intent. In addition, those who are good at one particular business may not operate other types of businesses well, or may not handle household finances well.

The prototypical constellations of traits (Lakoff 1987) – although only partially realized – that are held to index people with particular ethnic identities are called here “nodes” of ethnic identity. I also use nodes of ethnic identity to refer to the specific aggregations of people who, due to the various types of connections mentioned above that are associated with ethnic identities, are members of a social collectivity that is ascribed a particular ethnic identity. Since I suggest that people may have more than one ethnic identity, using the term “nodes” in this second way conveys the impermanence of ethnic identities in specific people, as well as the unrealized traits. For example, if a person converts to another religion, moves to another country, or marries someone of another “race,” he weakens or alters his significant connections with one perceived ethnic identity and increases his connection with another. It is not only the practice of traits associated with ethnic identities that confounds the assumptions of permanency in regard to ethnic identities. The composition of *both* aspects of nodes of ethnic identity is mutable. Understood in one or both of these ways, nodes of ethnic identity are differentiated points that impart “texture” to local social “landscapes,” to constructions of social space.

The making of distinctions, the “classifying practices” by which nodes of ethnic identity are differentiated, includes aspects of “practice” (Bourdieu 1977) in that they often are embodied and unrecognized – though pervasive – historically shaped systems of understanding about social relations. The notion of classifying practices advocated here emphasizes the dynamics of change that result from interactions between individual people, understandings, and collectivities. Interactive and relational processes are part and parcel of the cultural construction of ethnic identities.

Below I suggest that knowledge about perceived ethnic collectivities is learned through social interactions within and between collectivities. Expertise and emotional salience of this knowledge will vary from person to person, as will the specific ethnic identities about which one becomes knowledgeable. The local system of social relations will shape the texture of knowledge about ethnic identities and the cognitive structuring of that knowledge into cultural models about ethnic identities. Cultural models of ethnic identities will be highly place-dependent – specific to local social space – and will include understandings about markers perceived to represent distinctive nodes of ethnic identity. The markers, taken as symbols, will be multi-valent and open to some degree of manipulation by

individuals. Such systems of knowledge about ethnic identities will embed taken-for-granted goals that people often attempt to fulfill.

Ethnic identities can be understood as applications of cognitive models in social practice. Lakoff (1987) proposes that categories generally are not discernable by engaging in logical thought alone – that is by logic divorced from social practice. Empirically, it often is impossible to enumerate specific traits or properties that would be necessary and sufficient to include or exclude a particular object from any particular category. However, categories form in history, not in cognitive isolation. Thus, “members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category” (1987:12). This notion, that the properties of categories – in this case, of specific ethnic identities – reflect social relations and cannot be determined through logical deduction, is central to my explication of ethnic identities.

The notion of “cultural models” (e.g., Holland and Quinn 1987) is another intellectual thread that can contribute to this discussion of ethnic identities and classifying practices. Cultural models provide a fuller explanation of the social basis for reasoning and cognition than that provided by Lakoff. Quinn and Holland (1987:4) describe cultural models as:

presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it.

Cultural models, especially of the type that interest me, predicate a social world against which behavior is interpreted. Strauss (1992:3) adds that “*cultural models ... can have motivational force* because these models not only label and describe the world but also set forth goals (both conscious and unconscious) and elicit or include desires [emphasis in original].”

Holland (1992; see also Holland and Eisenhart 1990), for example, describes research into a cultural model of romance found among university women in the southern United States. Some of the women studied achieve a degree of “expertise” in the knowledge and behaviors of romance. This generally occurs when romance has become “emotionally salient.” Incorporating the writings of Spiro and of Dreyfus, Holland argues that as the goals and knowledge associated with a cultural model become emotionally salient, one develops a kind of “expertise” and becomes an agent in the social world that is organized by the goals of the cultural model. One comes to identify one’s self in the world by actualizing the goals of the cultural model. This type of “identification,” writes Holland (1992:83):

seems to describe ... the point or phase in internalization where the system that one has been socially interacting, according to the instructions and directions of others, becomes a system that one uses to understand and organize aspects of oneself and at least some of one’s own feelings and thoughts.

Such identification with a culturally constructed world engenders actions. As one identifies, for example with the cultural world of romance discussed by Holland, one forms oneself as a woman who is interested in – and who knows how to initiate, to carry on, and to bring to the appropriate conclusion – a romantic relationship with a man.

Cultural models become applicable to the study of ethnic identities because identification with a cultural model may, to a greater or lesser degree, socially define who one is. Similarly, people with a specific ethnic identity often become “expert” at the knowledge and practices associated with the ethnic identity and identify themselves as such. Ethnic identities and the social world in which these identities are meaningful become emotionally salient. Emotional saliency and expert knowledge, in turn, give meaning to action that is consistent with the understandings, experiences, and motives of those who are ascribed membership in the particular ethnic grouping.

Knowledge associated with cultural models probably is acquired by individuals, at least partly through processes described by Vygotsky (1929; see also Holland and Valsiner 1988). “Knowledge” encompasses more than information taught consciously (e.g., Edwards and Mercer 1987). Knowledge is intersubjective and collective. It is embedded in collective, cultural conventions of interpretation that are enacted in practice. Appropriating knowledge (Heath 1982) is an activity embedded in communicative interaction (Barth 1987; Edwards and Mercer 1987).

Vygotsky (1929) suggests that one of the interactive processes by which knowledge is acquired is through a memory-dependent process he calls mnemonics. In this concept, children, as they mature, gain the ability to think and remember using a multi-stage process that involves signs that function as mediating devices. Holland and Valsiner (1988:251) quote Vygotsky on the development of a gesture as a mediating device:

When the mother comes to the aid of the child and comprehends his/her movement as an indicator, the situation changes in an essential way. The indicatory gesture becomes a gesture for others. In response to the child's unsuccessful grasping movement, a response emerges not on the part of the object, but on the part of another human. Thus, other people introduce the primary sense into this unsuccessful grasping movement. ... The grasping is converted into an indication. ... We can now say that it is a gesture for oneself. ... The indicatory gesture initially relies on a movement to what others understand and only later becomes an indicator for the child.

Note that the mediating device, the gesture, is constructed through a social relationship. This is similar to the “interactivity” of classifying practices of ethnic identity. In the interactive process described by Vygotsky, mediating devices and development go hand in hand. One is formed through interaction and by learning two sorts of things: which particular mediating devices carry social significance, and how to interpret them. Similarly, the traits associated with ethnic identities –

and the relations between understood-to-be-differentiated ethnically identified collectivities – are learned through interactive processes that depend on mediating devices.

The mediating devices discussed by Vygotsky are both overdetermined and indeterminate; they can be applied to a wide variety of purposes and can take a variety of forms. However, they are not fully arbitrary. One might say that they are “heteroglossic” (Bakhtin 1981). The many external discourses one hears as one internalizes knowledge include a variety of voices/meanings and interpretations of those voices/meanings. The mediating devices/symbols of ethnic identities are loaded with multiple significances.

Stromberg (1986) presents an example of how a single mediating device – in this case, “grace” among members of a Swedish church – can represent a variety of experiences and understandings. I suggest, similarly, that the characteristics understood to represent ethnic identities are overdetermined and replete with multiple – even contradictory – meanings.

Ethnically identified persons enact and represent (Gans 1979) identity to others through markers or indices. These indices are constructed out of the cultural materials at hand. The cultural materials may include language or dialect, opinions thought to be common-sensical, subsistence practices, origin stories, and dress. Markers may lose or gain an association with a specific ethnic identity. Representations of ethnic identities mediate one’s affiliation with others who are perceived to share one’s ethnicity, and concurrently mediate one’s difference from those who are perceived to be “other.”

In addition, ethnic identities make sense in relation to one another. These are the terms by which a region’s social space is thought of – its “cognitive map” – and in turn are the local social nodes understood to be present, thus contributing to forming the cognitive map in practice. The ethnic identities that index local social space result in a cognitive map of that social space, and shape the local system of social relations as well. Cognitive maps are intersubjective, relying on shared but changeable markers to produce distinctions in the landscape of ethnic groupings, in the social landscape. The ethnic differentiations made by residents of a geographic area become ethnotheories, ways of culturally constructing – and of being culturally constructed by the perceived texture of – social space. To a large degree, ethnicity is a social differentiating process reflected in the map of social differentiations learned, thought, and subsequently practiced in everyday life.

Furthermore, ethnotheories of social space are practiced in physical space, and there are some correlations between physical and social spaces. Islands, in particular, produce a sense of physical and social boundedness. This is reflected to some degree in the boundedness of the ethnic identities present in the social space of an island. Topical geographic features occasionally can be associated with ethnic identities. For example, ethnic distinctions sometimes made between mountain and valley dwellers reflect a range of distinctions, including subsistence practices and residential architecture. At the least, ethnic identities on Curaçao are affected by its being an island. Limited ethnic groupings are present. There is rhetoric to

unite for island-wide purposes. In addition, the downwind side of the island is associated with rural activities and the descendants of people who were enslaved. The ethnic identities present on Curaçao are contingent on the specific history of this specific place, on the particular social history enacted within and partially shaped by the physical environment of Curaçao.

In summary, my concept of ethnic identities considers a wide variety of aspects of social life. The concept of classifying practices that I present draws on a variety of intellectual threads. I suggest that classifying practices of ethnic identities are situated in specific historical–ecological social relations. They are shaped by culturally situated cognitive activity through which historically contingent knowledge about social collectivities is structured into – and structures – a system of understandings about relations between social collectivities and the representations of those relations. Simultaneously, the representations of social collectivities – as well as the collectivities themselves – are formed through social interactions. People form themselves collectively through developing and learning in the context of taken-for-granted ethnic distinctions where the markers of those distinctions are manipulated within the parameters of specific social contexts.

### **This research in the context of area studies**

Caribbean societies are ethnic “stews” of recognizable ethnic distinctions. As in the United States, which is not a “melting pot” that has “boiled” many ethnicities into an undifferentiated culture (Glazer and Moynihan 1970), the Caribbean region contains recognizable ethnic distinctions. Social science studies of the Caribbean islands have noted the “pluralism” of Caribbean societies (e.g., Smith 1965). This pluralism usually is related to history, race, language, and social structure. Pluralism is understood to divide the population of any one island into social segments and institutions that are often parallel, but unlike each other. The social segments may differ in such domains as marriage customs, occupation, and religious practices. Further, these social segments may be arranged in a hierarchical relationship (Hoetink 1975). However, contrasting notions of Caribbean island identity promote and emphasize social unity, usually in the form of nationalism. For example:

We are neither Africans though we are most of us black, nor are we Anglo-Saxon though some of us would have others to believe this. We are *Jamaican*! And what does this mean? We are a mixture of races living in perfect harmony and as such provide a useful lesson to a world torn apart by race prejudice.  
(N. W. Manley, quoted by Nettleford 1973:40, emphasis in original)

People residing within the physical boundaries of individual islands may blend multiple cultural understandings into a single, island identity. Lowenthal (1973:197) borrows from Selvon to remind us that, “each island is a world.” Island residents compose the “stew” of their island identity from a “garden” of ethnic identities.



Jews are such a small minority of the peoples in the Caribbean that their socio-cultural particularities and interrelationships with other Caribbean peoples have not been well differentiated from the social relations and practices found more widely in the Caribbean. Lowenthal's (1972) influential approach was to discuss Jews as one of several "status-gap minorities" (see also Zenner 1991). Indeed, Jews in the Caribbean often have subsisted through trading activities that neither slaves nor plantation owners were in a position to perform; however, Jewish social interrelationships with other Caribbean peoples can be differentiated from those of the other status-gap minorities. For instance, Jews seem to have been welcomed in Surinam (Elazar 1989a), Barbados (Merrill 1964), Guadeloupe, and Martinique (Williams 1970) by European colonizers because of their experience in growing sugar cane in Brazil. In addition, Jewish traders on Curaçao owned and were captains of ships, risking their lives and possessions against Spanish Inquisitors and European warships out to protect mercantilist trading monopolies (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). Unlike other status-gap entrepreneurs, Jewish traders were backed by influential Jewish financiers in Europe (Swetschinski 1982). Also, Jewish settlers in Barbados (Davis 1909) and Jamaica (Hurwitz and Hurwitz 1965) struggled against special legal restrictions and group taxation – in addition to the usual prejudicial attitudes toward trading minorities.

I took issues of ethnic identity and of Jewish social life to the Caribbean, a region of unparalleled social heterogeneity (Trouillot 1992) and, moreover, to the Dutch Caribbean, a region receiving little attention in social science literatures written in English, French, and Spanish (Sedoc-Dahlberg 1990). Allen (1990:269) writes that:

the Dutch Caribbean territories are to the rest of the Caribbean what the Caribbean as a whole is to the rest of the Third World. Compared to other developing societies Caribbean ones are small and culturally, economically and politically complex. Among them Dutch territories are among the smallest in population yet are also among the most socially complex.

Allen argues, further, that the Caribbean region is unique to the Third World due to parliamentary democracies that provide civil but not economic freedoms – because of economic dependence upon metropolises, chiefly the United States. However, the Netherlands Antilles is, in addition, dependent economically on the Netherlands and Venezuela.

Similarly, Jewish discourse has grappled with the boundaries of Jewish identity for centuries. The question usually is cast as, "Who is a Jew?," and remains emotionally salient and contested. In a methodological contribution to Judaic studies, I explore differences and relations between two Jewish communities in one locale in order to achieve a broader perspective on a theoretical interest, namely, ethnic identity among Jews. This approach, I hope, will aid in understanding the diversity in Jewish experience, and contribute to a more relativist perspective on the question of "Who is a Jew?" It will also have implications for issues of assimilation and acculturation.



Most Jews who settled in the Caribbean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were “Western” or “Portuguese” Sephardi from Iberia (August 1989; Cohen and Peck 1993; Davis 1909; De Bethencourt 1925; Hilfman 1909; Holzberg 1976, 1977, 1987; Hurwitz and Hurwitz 1965; Judah 1909; Loker 1980; Maslin 1969; Merrill 1964; Oppenheim 1907; Schlesinger 1967; Shilstone 1989; Swetschinski 1982; Wilson 1993). Portuguese Sephardi Jewish experience and immigration to the Americas has been distinct from that of the Eastern Sephardi from Iberia who mostly settled around the Mediterranean (see Chapter 6); it has been distinct from that of the large numbers of Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to the Americas from Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Chapter 8); and, the Ashkenazi Jews who settled in the Caribbean have a somewhat different experience than the Ashkenazi who settled in the larger nations of the Americas, such as Canada and the United States. Judaic social science has tended to focus on the numerically larger American Ashkenazi populations and on Eastern Sephardi and “*Mizrahi*”<sup>1</sup> Jewish populations. I have attempted to add to the body of social science research on this relatively small, but significant, Jewish diaspora – of both Western, Portuguese Sephardi and of Ashkenazi who settled in the Americas but not in the larger nations of North or South America.

Anthropological research on the Sephardi Jews of Curaçao generally has focused either on kinship and on social organization or on gender and race relations (Abraham-Van der Mark 1980, 1993; Holzberg 1976; Karner 1969); and the only full anthropological monograph about this group has been Karner’s (1969). The research of historians has contributed to our understanding of Curaçaoan Jews (Emmanuel 1957; Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970; Kaplan 1982; Klooster 1997; Maslin 1982; Yerushalmi 1982), particularly Sephardi Jews, but often does not address issues of interest to anthropologists. The only anthropological publication about the Ashkenazi Jews of Curaçao is Abraham’s (1991) Dutch-language article. My work, then, adds to a relatively small amount of anthropological research on a significant, historic, and unusual Jewish community, and attempts to provide a relatively broad picture of a variety of elements contributing to the context of Jewish life on Curaçao – including the ecological, historical, political, economic, linguistic, and religious settings, as well as kinship, social organization, and labor relations. Discussion of this broad setting, then, is used to explore contemporary understandings and experience as they relate to ethnic identity.

The organization of this work moves from the obvious to the hidden, from the realm of the spoken and the affirmed to the realm of the assumed and the taken-for-granted that is expressed through classifying practices. This structure is a metaphor for the way I view ethnic identities.

This study of Jews is written at least as much for non-Jews as for Jews. The explanations and discussions of Judaic theology and practice will be relatively simple and brief, but enough information about Judaism will be presented so non-Jews will be able to understand the not infrequent depictions of the religious life of the Jews studied.

Following this introduction is a chapter about an unusual encounter with some members of one of the Curaçaoan Jewish congregations that occurred at the

beginning of my extended field research and that affected this research significantly. It has a bearing on the methodology of social science research, raising questions about rapport-building (an integral component of participant observation), as well as issues in representation, othering, and ethics. My description of this encounter also serves as an introduction to the understandings shared by Sephardi Jews on Curaçao.

The subsequent body of this text is divided into two parts. Part I includes three chapters, and discusses the “setting” of this research. Part II includes two chapters and discusses “social practice.” Viewed as a whole, the two parts illustrate the breadth of the factors included in classifying practices of ethnic identities. Chapter 4 (Part I) discusses Curaçaoan ecology and pre-history. Chapter 5 (Part I) discusses historical and contemporary social relations on Curaçao, and Chapter 6 (Part I) discusses the Sephardi Jews of Curaçao. Part I thus explores the received environmental, social, and cultural parameters that both shape and limit the cultural constructions of nodes of ethnic identity among Jews of Curaçao. Chapter 8 (Part II) compares aspects of contemporary Curaçaoan Sephardi Jewish social life and culture with that of Ashkenazi Curaçaoan Jews in order to illustrate alternative ways of being Jewish and of being Curaçaoan. Chapter 9 (Part II) discusses a variety of experiences, both individual and collective, that are involved in the practices by which Curaçaoans distinguish between social groupings. These experiences also are “performances” of understandings that index one’s place among the perceived-to-be-actual distinctions between social groupings. Part II, then, explores the vagaries and unexpected results of classifying practices in the case of ethnic identities.

# Research, a contract, and representation

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This chapter dwells on method and on ethnographic interpretation by introducing and contextualizing the remainder of this volume and the research activities that led to it – yet the chapter is not an introduction. The chapter combines ethnographic reflexivity with historical review to situate some of the people I studied and the way in which I studied them. It presents a picture of the ethnographic process and of one ethnographic experience. The “sites” at which these contextualizations occur are a written contract (Appendix 4) and the negotiations over that contract, each of which is described below. The contract pertains to my publications about Curaçaoan Jews. In the end, I muse about the impact of the contract and the contract negotiations on this research and on my representations of Curaçaoan Jews. A more “traditional” presentation of the methods by which this research was conducted appears in Appendix 5.

### A contract and negotiations

Shortly before my return to Curaçao in 1991, a Sephardi acquaintance told me that the Board wondered what I had done with the material I collected in 1989 and from a subsequent, mailed questionnaire (Appendix 1). The Board explained that my 1991–92 research would be more “serious” than the earlier project; it would be more extensive and the resulting publications more likely to be read. Thus, the Board sought to enter into a written contract with me in order to prevent some potential problematic consequences. The Board was concerned about what I eventually might publish about Curaçaoan Jews. I accepted the notion of a contract but wondered how it would work in practice. My encounter with the Jewish communities of Curaçao was influenced profoundly by this contract and the negotiations over it during the first three months of my participant-observation, from September to December 1991 (Benjamin 1999). In negotiating our contract, we each brought understandings about how we expected the other to act relative to my research and writing and about what the contract would do to shape or to limit our own and the other’s actions. Not all of our understandings were accurate.

Presented to me by the congregation’s President within two weeks of my arrival, the first draft contract was just over one page long. It had been prepared by a local

lawyer. The initial terms – kept intact in the final version – required that I receive prior written approval from the congregation for any material about them that I publish. In the contract's final version, publication without their approval would subject me to a fine of 5,000 Netherland Antilles Florin (NAF) – 2,800 US Dollars – per day from the date of publication until all copies were withdrawn from circulation. The Netherlands Antillean legal system could be called upon to prevent or to withdraw from circulation anything I might publish about Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. Later, while back in the United States, I wondered whether this contract would contravene the United States Constitution. A lawyer informed me that it would not, that the Bill of Rights protects freedom of speech from *government* infringement. Private parties are free to restrict speech.

Soon after being presented with the first draft of the contract, I met with an influential member of the congregation. We came up with changes. Negotiations over the wording of the contract lasted until my third month in the field. Along the way the congregation discharged the original lawyer. This pleased me. Independent of the congregation, I had wanted the lawyer discharged. He had been slow to produce revised drafts and several of his revised drafts either did not include or inaccurately recorded clauses that the Board and I had agreed upon. The Board decided on its own to discharge the lawyer around this time. Finally, after meeting with a mediator, we were able to sign the seventh draft of the contract. The central clause of the contract is Article 3(d):

The Review Committee shall not withhold its approval in matters regarding Alan Benjamin's interpretations and/or conclusions drawn from factual information, provided those facts are verified as correct ... and provided that these interpretations and/or conclusions will not, according to the Review Committee, adversely affect the reputation of any individual, organization or company which is directly or indirectly connected with The Congregation.

In effect, Board members said that having a "voice" in ethnographic productions about them was not enough; relying on the sensitivity of ethnographers was not enough; and the reciprocal relationship normally established during the course of participant-observation was not enough for them. They insisted on the right to determine for themselves the acceptability of all material that I publish about them.

Many ethnographers have sent their material voluntarily to the people studied for comments, and at the onset of research projects there have been attempts by those studied to exert various types and degrees of control over what would be published about them (e.g., Appell 1978:208; Barnes 1979:esp. 141–144; see also Brettell 1993a; Cassell and Jacobs 1987; Fluehr-Lobban 1991; and Rynkiewicz and Spradley 1976 for reviews of ethical issues in anthropological research). However, Claire Farrer's (1976) explicit agreement, sealed by a ritual – in which the Mescalero Apaches she studied were to review material about them prior to publication, and in which their consent to publish would be required – is the only similar

arrangement between ethnographer and people studied that I have found in the realm of academic ethnographic research not sponsored by parties interested in applying or controlling the results.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the contract discussed here, the agreement between Farrer and the Mescalero Apache was verbal. A written contract would have been too reminiscent of the many broken treaties between European Americans and Native Americans.

### Concerns, motivations, and rationales

The request for a contract did not stem from my research proposal or from me personally. In proximate terms the Board's request for a contract stemmed from recent conflict with an historian over his portrayal of the congregation, coupled with a feeling of responsibility on the part of Board members to protect the legacy and reputations of those most important to them. In addition, the community is an elite, literate group, aware and protective of their position and familiar with legal matters (compare with Holzberg 1980). Virtually all members of the community speak English. Some members read some English-language scholarly material, and understand that publications about them in English will be read by people in contact with them, affecting their community. Finally, the willingness of Board members to discuss a contract with me – rather than to oppose my research – indicates that they feel a link with Jews and a respect for text, including a desire to see their community remembered in text.

In recent decades there has been considerable interest in Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel by outsiders, fueled by the fact that the Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel synagogue building (the *Snoa*) is the oldest continuously used synagogue in the western hemisphere. There are public visiting hours, tourists come to services, a museum is maintained in the synagogue complex, scholars came to lecture in 1982 – the 250th anniversary of the *Snoa* – and journalists visit frequently to prepare articles about the congregation for tourist magazines and for the Jewish press. The congregation and its synagogue building are understood to have historic significance to Curaçaoans who are not members, to Jews world-wide, and to anyone interested in European settlement of the western hemisphere (Benjamin 1990). The congregation and synagogue building thus constitute a legacy over which current members have a kind of guardianship – what one member called, “curatorship.” Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and its synagogue building are a legacy “owned” personally by the living members of the congregation. The Board takes a leading role in gatekeeping access to this and other legacies, acting on behalf of the members.

Early on I gave my research proposal to the Board. Few read it. We came from different cultural worlds. I was there to learn about their culture; they were not engaged in research into “my” culture of academic anthropology in the United States. Most people in Curaçao who discussed my work seemed to expect me to engage in a straightforward process in which I would collect information that I would then report and interpret. The practice of writing about selected events, not

all of which I could predict, in order to illustrate theoretical points – which may hold no interest to members of the community – was difficult to convey. I thought that Board members would not and should not be expected to understand the research and writing processes with which I expected to be engaged. They were not familiar with contemporary anthropological scholarship and its processes. Brettell (1993b:104) writes, “... while we may be intrigued by a turn of phrase ... or attracted to a mode of analysis that ignores the details in order to evaluate the structural relationship ... our readers [that is, those studied] may not be.” The primary reference points with which to compare my project were histories and novels, not anthropological monographs.

Initially, I was accepted by the Board because I was Jewish and represented “scholarship.” As a Jew I was expected to be sympathetic to their concerns about anti-Semitism. As a scholar my purpose was deemed to be fair-minded – that is, neither sensationalist nor bigoted – and to be directed toward increasing knowledge. In general, increasing knowledge was understood by the Board to be an endeavor to support. Moreover, during the negotiating process, I was told repeatedly that Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel had no intention of censoring my research. However, although accepted as a scholar, I had never published, and my knowledge of publishing practices was limited. I was not confident that I could anticipate my needs in the realm of scholarly publishing. In addition, Board members could not refer to published works of mine in order to evaluate me – though at least three members of the congregation had read an extensive student paper of mine about them from 1990.

I immediately agreed to the idea of a contract because I believed people being studied should have some control over representations of their lives. Complete absence of control on their part would constitute exploitation of them on my part – it would be using their lives to advance my research and career without considering their wishes. The opportunity to attempt to protect themselves from harm – caused by things I publish about them – would seem to be included in the concept of respect for persons. Also, I hoped that a review process would help correct inaccuracies in my writing. Board members demurred from accepting this latter responsibility, yet ended up contributing many helpful changes to my dissertation.

To me, this contract and our negotiations also seemed part of “establishing rapport” – an essential stage in participant-observation – even though the negotiation process itself risked antagonizing people who I hoped to study. I understood the contract – and my signing the contract, whenever that would come to pass – as the Board’s way of testing me before endorsing my integration into their community. Embedded in our developing social relations, the contract, this nascent “covenant,” committed me to sensitive and respectful conduct and the Board to cooperate with my research. In a process at times adversarial, we learned something of each other’s expectations and anxieties over my impending research. In addition, I understood the contract and our negotiations over it to be manifestations of local cultural understandings; this experience would constitute significant material to consider, and be part of the research process itself.

Although the fine contained in the contract appears exorbitant, especially for a graduate student or an anthropologist, I was confident that I would not do anything to cause the fine to be levied. Thus, I did not raise the amount of the fine as an issue during contract negotiations, hoping to place one potential source of contention to the side. In addition, the high dollar amount reveals the Board's concern that I might choose to leave academia and try to get rich by writing a scandal-mongering piece aimed at a wide audience. This is not an unreasonable concern (see, for example, Sheehan 1993:87–88), but they were not interested in censoring scholarly publications.

Another concern stemmed from knowing that I would be observing many congregational members in large gatherings, for example, during religious worship and at parties. I wanted to ensure that people understood the purpose of my presence. Since it would be impossible to ask every person present on such occasions to sign an informed consent form (see Mann 1976, who faced the same problem while conducting research in a bar), I asked the Board to publish a letter from me in the congregational newsletter. I also had made a commitment to write a letter in the congregational newsletter prior to my fieldwork, in the "Human Subjects Proposal" to my Institutional Review Board (IRB). The reaction by the Board of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel to my request illustrates the inherent inability of IRBs and researchers to anticipate the concerns of those studied. The Board thought publishing such a letter would indicate to members of the congregation that they were endorsing my research. Their reluctance to provide such an endorsement without some control over what I would write about the congregation was an additional reason they asked for a contract. After the contract was signed, my letter was published in the newsletter with a statement from the Board that it had endorsed my research.

Yet another concern of mine was that future congregational political conflicts, and esoteric anthropological literary devices and theoretical assumptions, might impede the acceptance of my work by congregational reviewers. Political shading of how those studied read ethnographies about themselves has been reported, in particular, when media misrepresentations of ethnographies invoke and thus incite social antagonisms already present (e.g., Brettell 1993a). In such instances the anthropologist has become a symbol around which opposing interests crystallize. Despite nuances present in the original ethnography, brief descriptions or conclusions may be taken out of context and purported to summarize the anthropologist's findings. Then, those on opposite sides of local conflicts may draw on such misreadings to buttress their position. To address these issues – at least among the reviewers – the Board agreed to an arbitration procedure as a way to resolve conflicts short of going to court, and to a two-week deadline for each forty pages reviewed to ensure timely responses to my material.

A further concern of mine was that members of the congregation would respond in a wide variety of ways to my material and that it would be impossible to please everyone on every issue. Thus, I sought to limit the number of reviewers. We



agreed on a committee of five to increase the likelihood that a quorum of three always would be present.

Now geographic distance has been added to cultural distance. Spontaneous and informal discussion between us is difficult – making it harder to work together on reviews of my material and to clear-up disagreements and misunderstandings. Phone calls are expensive, and mail delivery is uncertain. Board members and I are less well known to each other, as our lives continue in a less connected fashion.

As elites the congregation had much at risk from my research, and within the context of Curaçaoan social relations probably assessed the potential for harm as a result of my research more knowledgeably than I could. Though Board members seemed to imbue me with more power than I felt, I could not ignore the demand of this elite group for a contract. The Board did not have the power to prevent me from conducting research among members of the congregation who wished to cooperate with me; however, their opposition would have limited my effectiveness. As a mere graduate student, with limited funds, I doubted the power that appeared to be attributed to me. After all, members of the congregation had access to governmental authorities and to financial resources unavailable to me in Curaçao. However, I came from a powerful nation, was a representative of a respected university, and – despite my junior academic status – was deemed to be due respect as a scholar. As such, my writings might be read and deemed to be accurate by people who would come into contact with members of the congregation, thus affecting the lives of congregation members.

## Historical and cultural factors

Twenty-five years earlier a previous Board had undergone, as I understand it, heated argument with Rabbi, Dr. Isaac Emmanuel over the contents of a history he was writing under Board sponsorship. In his 1970 publication (Emmanuel and Emmanuel), Emmanuel included a short discussion titled “censorship” (pp. 8–9) in which he wrote that he and several members of the Board “literally fought over each word and comma” (p. 9). However, one member of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel who was involved in these discussions notes that Emmanuel’s opinions, though in direct opposition to those of the Board of that time, still were presented extensively in his book (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:Chapter 25). The dispute centered on the terms of the merger between Congregation Mikvé Israel and Congregation Emanu-El (see Chapter 6). Emmanuel thought the merger relinquished too much Sephardi religious ritual and too many specifically Curaçaoan Jewish traditions in favor of a type of Judaism, Reconstructionism, that he thought a passing trend, theologically misguided, and unequal to the task of maintaining a vibrant Jewish congregation.

Relations between Emmanuel and the Board left bitter feelings on both sides. After his death and the sale of all copies of his work, Emmanuel’s daughter reportedly refused to allow his work to be reprinted. She is said to have commented that the congregation drove him to his death. On the other hand, some members of the



congregation were convinced that Emmanuel, who had access to the congregation's archives, took with him the earliest known document written in Papiamentu, the creole language of Curaçao. The document (see Gomes Casseres 1990:26; Henriquez 1988:100), a love letter written in 1776 by a congregation member, has never been recovered, and is felt to be a significant loss of congregational patrimony.

Current Board members are relatives or friends of the Board members who held discussions with Emmanuel and are informed about the discussions that took place. Their understanding is that were it not for the Board's intervention, Emmanuel would have published material that might have had long-term "negative effects on individuals in that community." They feel duty-bound to protect the good name of the congregation and responsible to make difficult decisions about matters that might arise. A general guideline was "to keep peace" between congregants. They feel that a contract enables them to protect the congregation and its members without compromising my academic freedom.

Review and control over the Emmanuels' 1970 publication, however, was predated by related instances. The 1688 community by-laws (*haskamot*), for example, prohibit members from composing "in jest or otherwise ... a verse, sonnet or pasquin injuring his fellowman" (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:545). An incident from as long ago as 1746 is instructive. David Aboab, a religious teacher, arrived on Curaçao from Jamaica, probably having grown up in Venice. He clashed with the rabbis present on Curaçao at the time, Jesurun and De Sola, and pronounced a religious ruling contrary to theirs. As a result, he was excommunicated. When he refused to express the public contrition necessary to bring the excommunication to an end, Congregation Mikvé Israel arranged to have Aboab banished from Curaçao. He left for Amsterdam with a manuscript about the events in Curaçao. In Amsterdam, Aboab blamed De Sola for his problems. He was denounced and, at the request of the Curaçao *parnassim* (Board of Directors; see Chapter 6), the Amsterdam *parnassim* forced him to sign a statement saying that his charges against De Sola were untrue and that he would not publish anything without the consent of the *parnassim* (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970).

In more recent times, American historian Jacob R. Marcus was required to obtain prior approval from the Mikvé Israel Board before publishing any of the photostats he had taken of the congregation's archives in 1952 (Marcus 1953); Emmanuel submitted an earlier work (Emmanuel 1957) to the review of a committee of three members of the Mikvé Israel before its publication (Emmanuel 1957).

The ideological roots of this perspective were present from the formation of Congregation Mikvé Israel, in the congregation's first known internal regulations (*haskamot*) in 1688. When discussing the means of disciplining members who lead "an indecent life," one section explains a significant rationale for congregational authority: "if we do not do so, it will be said that we approve of improper conduct and on that account we may suffer prejudice, etc." (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:544–545). From the outset, Congregation Mikvé Israel, mindful of its

members' and ancestors' oppression in Spain and Portugal (see Chapter 6) was concerned to remove all possible justifications for persecuting or harming its members. The recent Holocaust of Jews in Europe has served to recall and to reinforce this perspective.

One also might assert that our contract is rooted in Jewish tradition generally. Some claim that respect for text and a tendency toward a contractual approach to social relations are characteristic of many Jews. Anecdotal evidence for these can be found; however, one should be cautious about endorsing these characterizations as "typical" of Jews.

For traditionally religious Jews, everyday life is shaped by a range of Divine and ancillary regulations or laws, the *halacha* ("tradition"; from the Hebrew root meaning "walk," as in "to go"; *halacha* may be thought of as a path one traverses by means of one's behavior). *Halacha*, which has both oral and written forms, governs, for traditional Jews, the diet, the cycle of prayer, social norms, sexual practices, and more. Moreover, like any system of law, the *halacha* must be interpreted continually in order to apply it to changing circumstances. Those whose interpretations are most widely accepted – primarily rabbis – have their opinions compared with one another.

Goldberg (1987) explains that through study, text in Judaism has brought the mythical past and Divinity into daily life. Furthermore, text, as applied, discussed, and performed – as used – is a social activity. Goldberg (1987:321–322) writes, "The drive to perform the *mitzvot* [commandments, or good deeds] precisely as they are outlined in the authoritative texts, within the flux of historical change, produces a tension that generates gloss upon gloss, interpretation upon interpretation." Thus, in both a legal and a social-behavioral sense, text has had a significant role in the lives of Jews, literate or not, for centuries.

I do not claim, though, that Jewish tradition directly led to our contract – a legal, written artifact produced to regulate social relations, much like documents of the *halacha* – for I would not describe the members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel as traditional Jews, and because I found no evidence to support an assumption of such direct causality. Rather, I would say that the roots of the Board's desire for a contract *might* include traditional Jewish practices in regard to text as an untestable, peripheral factor.

In addition to the above-described political–historical–cultural factors, a prime cause for the actions of the members of the Board was their sense of kinship (see Chapter 6). Members of the Board negotiated on behalf of their loved ones, on behalf of a host of people – living, dead, and yet unborn – whom they felt responsible to represent. For example, an older woman I interviewed during the period of negotiations asked whether people from the congregation would read my work before it was published. I said the Board and I were working on a contract to arrange that. She said, "You see, they know what we want." Board members felt they carried a trust for those with whom their social relations were "multiplex" (Gluckman 1962:26–27). Board members were gate-keeping access to this legacy, acting on behalf of the members.

A comment frequently heard on Curaçao is “this is a small island.” The number of people with whom one is in regular contact on Curaçao, and who can have a significant impact in one’s life, is not large. Though they are in contact with people living in many other places, social life among Curaçaoan Jews might be characterized as intimate. The important things, one could say, happen close to home; people know each other – or think they know each other – well. Characterizations and reputations – of individuals, kin groups, and perceived ethnic groups – are crucial in every facet of one’s life. They affect business relations, prestige, potential marriage partners, and self-esteem. Most important, once fixed, they are difficult to change. Negotiating the contract helped me understand this; the contract ensures that I recognize this in my writing.

### **Impact and effects, sleepless nights**

Although the contract was negotiated to a “successful” conclusion – that is, an agreement between us was reached – the negotiation process was tense. For my part, I stayed awake for hours many nights. I was anxious about my ability to gain rapport, and about the effect on my research of the contract negotiations and the contract. I wondered whether I would be able to conduct the research I had planned. This was a concern with a basis in fact. Near the end of our negotiations, a Board member told me that the Board had decided to deny any endorsement of my research if we could not resolve our differences in that meeting. This did not shock me, because I already had assessed the situation as possibly beyond resolution. I had considered several alternative research plans, and was at least partly reconciled to such a change. I had kept myself awake reviewing in my mind the discussions I had with representatives of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, wondering what I could or should have done better or differently. I was concerned with how failing to commence research would affect my reputation with the faculty of my university, and over what to do about the grant funding I had received and spent. I was dismayed over the potential loss of time, energy, and finances I had committed to this research. I wondered what people in Curaçao were saying about me.

Moreover, I refrained from conducting formal interviews out of apprehension that interviewing would disrupt the contract negotiations by producing an appearance of disrespect for the Board’s position, and in order to avoid contributing to disputes between possible “supporters” and “opponents” of my research – not that I knew of any such division among congregation members. I wondered, however, whether members understood my delay in requesting interviews with them. At one point I was told that the Board understood my actions during our negotiations to be obstructive. A negotiator told me to “get the chip off my shoulder.” Would these negotiations result in my being perceived by members of the Jewish communities as uncooperative? Would they prevent – rather than constitute a process of developing – eventual rapport between us?

I also stayed awake out of a sense of isolation and helplessness. I knew of no one to seek out for advice who had the unlikely combination of legal and

anthropological expertise and who also was familiar with the people, the community, and the cultural understandings with which I was in contact. I had not researched the legal and scholarly issues involved with our contract prior to arriving in Curaçao – I had not foreseen the necessity. I felt unprepared. I repeatedly speculated about the personal and cultural factors that produced these events. In addition, knowing about the process of academic publication and advancement only second-hand, I was not able to assess with confidence the ramifications of the contract upon my future career and ability to publish. Finally, I was angry and spent energy flailing about, so to speak, seeking to understand. These flailings, though uncomfortable, were a significant element of participant-observation. Trying to make sense of these circumstances and events contributed to my local knowledge. It helped me to become acquainted with a number of people, through encounters that were more genuine than polite, for example; and it helped me to realize the degree to which Board affairs are kept in confidence.

The contract negotiations affected this research. I concluded them feeling shaken, and was hesitant “to rock the boat” further. I may have avoided asking some tough questions and was hesitant to approach certain people for information or interviews. I may have been overly circumspect. For approximately the next six months, I felt an underlying anxiety – as a kind of “background noise” – that some members of one of the Jewish communities viewed me with suspicion. I felt a need, that I did not know how to satisfy, to justify myself and my actions to unidentifiable, undetermined people. I may have sought approval unduly. As a result, I went through a process of developing a relationship with people with whom I had struggled. This may have helped me better to comprehend local concerns because conflict sometimes reveals more than civility.

In the first years after fieldwork, the contract also has affected the representation and publication of my research. At times I have felt stymied when trying to write. I did not know how to join a vivid telling of cultural and social life with a need for discretion and anonymity. Further, it has not been clear to me what the people who are to review my writing would understand as offensive. Considering the ambiguities and uncertainties of ethnographic research, the reviewers probably were not clear about how to caution me. These uncertainties, the terms of our contract, and my unwillingness to harm our relationship – especially prior to graduating – limited the occasions and shaped the form in which my research has been conveyed to others. Along with other anthropologists, I have agonized about whether and how to present my material, including both written and spoken presentations, in a variety of professional fora. Friendships and a sense of responsibility toward those we study normally grow during the course of participant-observation. This appears to result in a sensitivity to the concerns of those studied that conflicts with the desire to write revealingly. Many anthropologists are stymied until arriving at an individual response to this dilemma. The contract has made this dilemma more acute, but it has not created a new type of dilemma.

While the contract has slowed possible publication of my research, congregational reviewers improved my dissertation by correcting some mistakes. The review

process has made me more cautious in seeking publication, which may have affected my ability to find an academic posting. However, the magnitude of this effect has been small. Each submission to the congregation and each review by them seems to improve our confidence in one another.

The effect of the contract and the contract negotiations on me and on the people I studied is a prominent factor in this research. The contract and its negotiations set a tone for our subsequent relations. Though the effects often were subtle, they must be understood to be at the heart of the understandings I gained. The intense feelings produced during the contract negotiations lessened with time. A year later a Board member pronounced me, “one of us.” My work was mentioned in an oral, public review of congregational activity. I largely had been accepted. I basked in a number of good friendships and was thankful for the many kindnesses I had received from the Jews of Curaçao. As one Board member thought, the contract enabled members of the congregation to feel secure that talking with me would not lead to harm, thus facilitating my research. However, the contract was not entirely effective in this regard. It may have reassured many, but five members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel refused to participate in interviews with me, and some others participated reluctantly.

One effect of this contract is to alter the representation I present here. I place myself prominently in this representation of Curaçaoan Jews, although I do not play a prominent role in Curaçaoan Jewish life. Nonetheless, whether desired or not, I play a central role in the “drama” of this contract. I cannot exclude myself from its telling. Moreover, the Board requested, and I promised those I interviewed, that names and identifying details would be excluded from my representations of them. Thus, with one exception the reader will not find narratives of individual Curaçaoan Jews in this work; will not find names; and will not find a narrative centered on the experiences of identifiable persons. Rather, readers will find narratives about me in contact with a somewhat amorphous mass that I call in the abstract Curaçaoan Jews. Readers will find unattributed quotes and general descriptions – narratives of my encounters, with the minimum necessary information about the specific individual quoted or described. I discuss collective contexts more frequently than the context of any individual behavior or statement. When I do describe individual actions, they are presented with little identifying information.

Thus, the contract affected both the methods and the representation of this research. In a complex way, it helped to shape the ebb and flow of my encounters, diverting my attention, for example, in the early months to non-Jews and to members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek (see Chapter 7). It increased my interest in the role that the Board plays in the everyday life of members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, and to questions of community boundaries, internal social variation, and processes of social control within the congregations. As often happens with anthropologists “in the field,” the people I studied modified my research focus by showing me what was important to them.

In regard to representation, the contract has contributed to making this volume

more of an experimental anthropology, more reflexive (Behar 1996; Marcus and Fischer 1986) than it might have been were there no contract. In the volume, I have discussed my own feelings and experiences – primarily in regard to the contract itself. This has served to reveal the tenor of some of my encounters with people studied, the progression or development of some of those encounters, and informs readers about the degree of ethnographic authority – one might say, of accuracy, fidelity, or correctness – to attribute to the volume. However, this ethnography – this representation of life on Curaçao – is selectively reflexive. It also employs a more traditional style in which behaviors and patterns are reported, reviewed, and interpreted. In this text, which emphasizes a variety of contextual information, individual actions often are extracted from their individual context and distilled into brief narratives in order to illustrate patterns that I observed to be representative. The practice of representation found in this volume and influenced by this contract combines several approaches in an attempt to comply with the contract and to present a description that explores both experience and patterns.

Part I, following this chapter, describes the setting in which this research occurred.



Part I

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Setting

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## Chapter 3

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# Introduction

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The next three chapters introduce the reader gradually to a place and a group. This part begins with a broad perspective of Curaçaoan life, starting in Chapter 4 with the ecological setting. It narrows to discuss the general Curaçaoan social setting in Chapter 5. The “funnel” narrows further in Chapter 6 to present the Curaçaoan Sephardi Jewish social setting.

These three chapters inform and draw the reader in to a place and familiarize the reader with an “other.” As an impressionist painter represents the whole through individual dots, the material I present can represent the whole I discuss only through a series of “dots,” of images that convey a sense of something larger than the images themselves. Just as distance from an impressionist painting induces a sense of seeing the whole, distance from the “other” allows readers to imagine a whole from my selected representations. In addition, notes are kept to a minimum in order more fully to integrate into the body of the text “impressions” that would have been shunted aside.

This part of the text “locates” my research and the people I studied in space and time, in a social and ecological environment, in a past both affecting and remembered in the present. As a result, Chapter 4 is written to resemble a travelogue in some ways. Readers are encouraged to enter a world that probably differs from their own. The details, anecdotes, and quotes that I provide are an attempt to entice the reader into the understandings and experience of a place and a group – to the extent to which I am able to interpret and represent those understandings and experiences.

Chapter 5 is an apparently conventional narrative that is, however, reflexive in its organization. It conjoins social history and ethnicity to demonstrate the interrelation of the two. I argue that ethnic identity is constructed socially rather than determined by birth. Also, constructions of ethnic identity in Curaçao occur within a limited social web. Race, religion, nationality, place of birth, education, and subsistence practices powerfully constrain and are reflected in claims of ethnic identity and in the experience of ethnic identifying.

This is research primarily into a Jewish community. Thus, though the chapters describe Curaçao generally, a minor thread in Chapters 4 and 5 is to insert Jews throughout. Their lives intertwine with other Curaçaoan lives. I inscribe Jews in

my generalized narrative in order to begin to acquaint readers with the Jewish presence on Curaçao. Chapters 6 and beyond, then, further that acquaintance.

A second minor thread throughout this book weaves in descriptions of festivals or holy days. Each chapter includes a description of a public ritual I observed and recorded in my field notes. Ritual – whether sacred or secular, religious or national – is a symbolic practice that shapes and reflects, transcends and subverts understandings and social order (e.g., Geertz 1960). I hint at the significance of ritual and of the topics I discuss by associating one with another.

Chapter 6 begins with a synthesis of current narratives about the crystallization of Sephardi Jewry in the Netherlands and its radiation to the Americas, describes Sephardi settlement on Curaçao, and the social relations that formed there. These provided the foundation for the social naming, the classification, of Curaçao Sephardi as a distinguishable social group on Curaçao.

# Ecology and prehistory

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### Ecology

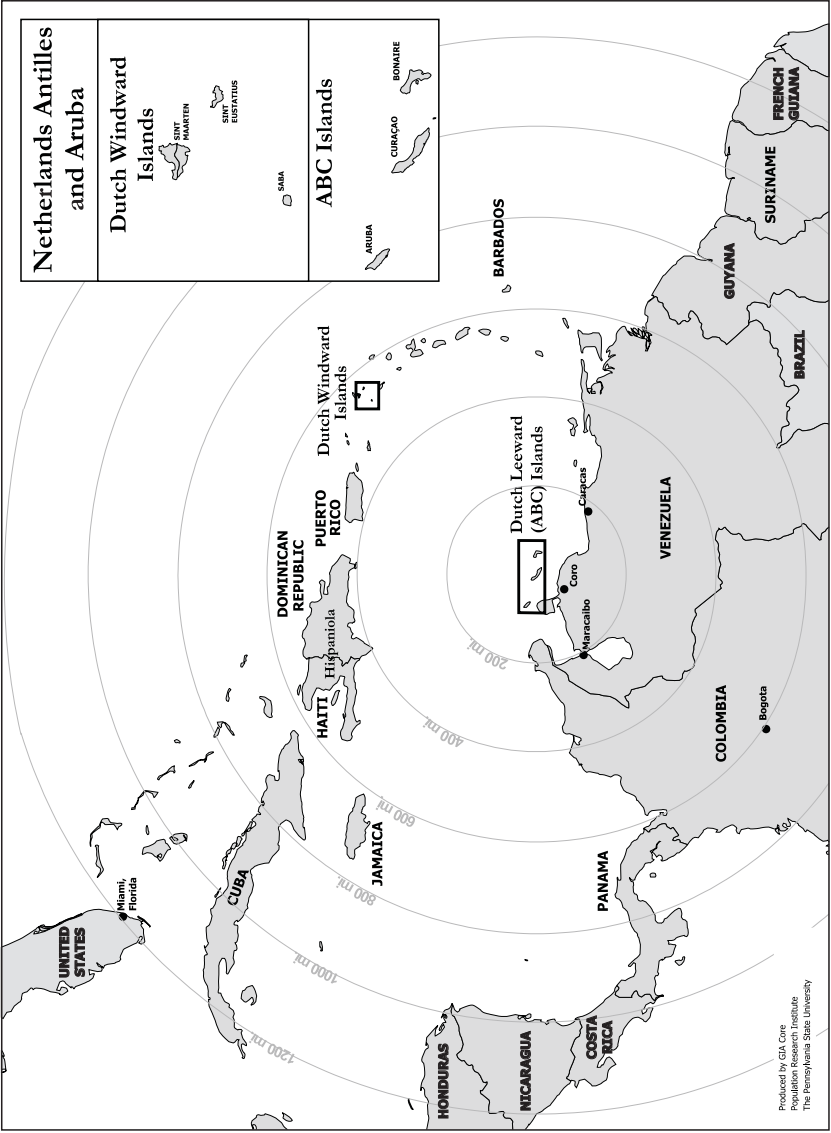
People are immersed in a physical environment that shapes their social lives and cultures in subtle ways – notwithstanding human alterations to the physical environment. This work attempts to represent a specific place in existence at the moment of my arrival. This representation depends on the prior existence of place and people. There exists a relationship between environmental setting, human life, and this work (see Naipaul 1994 for an application on Trinidad). Thus, in this chapter I describe the ecological and pre-historic setting in order to convey to readers a sense of this unique place.

Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao are what have been called the Leeward Dutch, or, “ABC” Islands (Figure 1). Curaçao is a long, narrow island in the southern Caribbean Sea. Its length is about 38 miles from roughly west northwest to east southeast and between about two and seven and one-half miles across – “pinched” in the center, with “wider wings.” Total land area is 171 square miles (Gastmann 1978). “A small island,” everyone says – referring as much to social as to physical size.

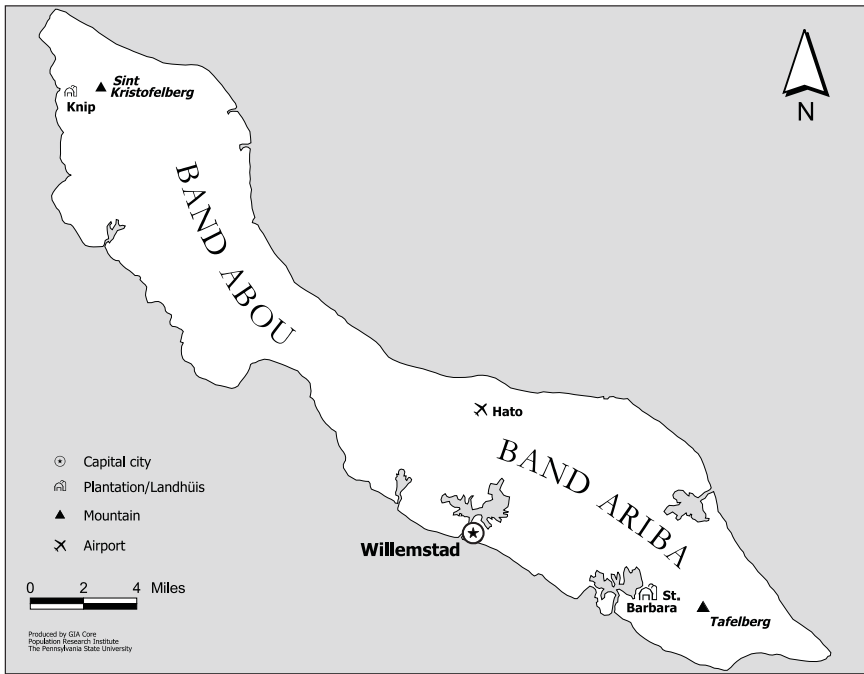
The geological formation called Curaçao is situated 43 miles off the coast of Venezuela (Gould 1971) – from 12° 2' to 12° 23' 30" North; and from 68° 44' 30" to 69° 10' West (Stoffers 1956) – about 800 miles north of the equator.

Simplified, Curaçao is composed of a basalt center with a limestone overlay (Beets and MacGillavry 1977; Beunk and Klaver 1977; Blume 1974; Goslinga 1979; Haviser 1987; Olson 1970; Schuchert 1968) that has been eroded to produce bays (Gould 1971) and caverns. In addition, there are cherts in some sections of the western end of the island, shales mainly in the mid-island, where it narrows, and small areas of marls (Haviser 1987). The soils mostly are sandy or loamy sand (Haviser 1987), one reason for limited agricultural activity. Underwater, Curaçao is encrusted with coral. The coral is diverse, abundant, and home to a variety of sea creatures. Together with clear, blue water, this makes Curaçao a mecca for scuba diving. Its underwater sights are a significant feature of Curaçao's attraction for tourists.

*Sint Cristoffelberg* (Dutch spelling) or *Sint Kristofelberg* (Papiamentu spelling), on the western end, is the highest point on Curaçao (Figure 2), at 375 meters



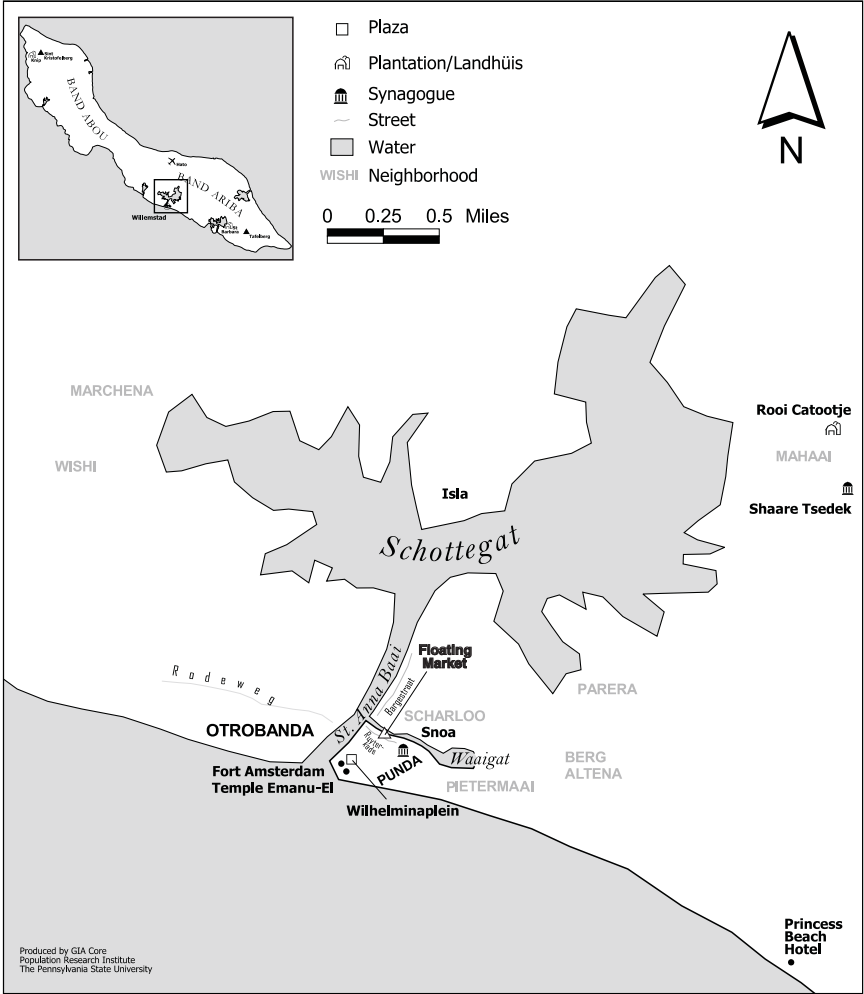
Map 1 Caribbean region



Map 2 Curaçao

(Gastmann 1978). It sits amidst a number of peaks that have been declared a national park. School children, if not too young, often are taken to climb it. They generally leave as a group about an hour before sunrise in order to attain the peak in time to see the sun rise. On the eastern end the *Tafelberg*, a table-shaped limestone mount (Blume 1974), stands out, a site of phosphate mining. This end of the island is relatively more arid.

The *Schottegat*, located near the middle of the southern coast, is the largest harbor on the island. The city of Willemstad, capital of Curaçao and of the Netherlands Antilles, surrounds it (Figure 3). The *Schottegat* is entered through a narrow but deep channel called *St. Anna Baai* (St. Anna Bay) that splits Willemstad in two. Bordering *St. Anna Baai* on the east is *Punda* (the "Point"), while *Otrobanda* (the "Other Side") is to its west. In *Punda* is located the fortress, Fort Amsterdam, largely completed in 1635 (Hartog 1968), in which are government offices, the Netherlands Antillean Parliament (*Staten*), and much more. *Otrobanda* is the location of the major Curaçaoan hospital (St. Elizabeth's). *Punda* tends to be more "upscale," and, by reputation, caters to tourists and to wealthier shoppers. Of course this is not entirely accurate. There are bargain shops in *Punda*, cafes, and a "floating market" of boats from Venezuela docked along a street, displaying produce under colorful awnings, one right next to another. *Otrobanda* was settled later, and is known as a place for more prosaic, everyday activities and shops.



Map 3    Willemstad

Otrabanda has the reputation of being a place frequented more by “local” Curaçaoans. The term “local” is the English term used for the Papiamentu “*yu di Kòrsou*” (child of Curaçao). *Yu di Kòrsou* generally is used to refer to Afro-Curaçaoans, and indicates pride in Afro-Curaçaoan traditions. Both Punda and Otrabanda have bus stations, each serving as a central terminus for one or the other side of the island. There is a one-bus route that circles the Schottegat, back and forth from one terminus to the other. Pedestrians cross St. Anna Baai in only one place, the floating bridge named the Queen Emma Bridge, called the *ponton* (pontoon), originally built in 1888 (Hartog 1968) by the American Consul of the time, Leonard B. Smith. It swings sideways to allow ships to pass. When the bridge

is open, a free ferry carries pedestrians from one side to the other. The pontoon bridge is an informal symbol of Curaçao and a practical necessity in Curaçaoan life. Marugg (1960:188) writes in his novel, *Weekend Pilgrimage*:

The town, with its bridge, which swings open for sea traffic, and closes again to let land traffic pass over it. The bridge, as symbol of activity, trade, industry, tourists and shipping, of a constructive future. The bridge, not only as a bond unifying two halves of a town, but also as the mystic synthesis of the town, of the island. The bridge as trophy, as token of victory, which tells everyone of the miracle: the island is no longer an island, but is linked with the great world outside.

De Haseth (1991:143) describes the Queen Emma Bridge as “a symbol of the bridging function performed by the Antilles – forming a link between South America on the one hand and Europe and the United States of America on the other.” There currently is no toll to cross the Queen Emma Bridge, but before 1934 fees were two cents for pedestrians with shoes, one cent for pedestrians with sandals, and no charge for barefoot pedestrians (Dunbar 1934). Until 1974 the pontoon bridge was the only way to cross *St. Anna Baai* by vehicle, too. The other option was to drive all the way around the *Schottegat*. Now there is a “high” bridge across *St. Anna Baai* called the Queen Juliana Bridge. The Juliana Bridge is for vehicular traffic, and at 183 feet above sea level (Ecury 1992) can accommodate marine traffic underneath without needing to stop vehicular traffic.

The *Schottegat* is the site of most harbor activity. Alongside it, freight containers are unloaded and pass through customs. Ships are bunkered. The *Schottegat*, too, is the site of *Isla*, a large oil refinery that Shell began constructing in 1915, which radically transformed Curaçaoan economic and social life. The refinery drew labor from throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere to refine oil from the Maracaibo area of Venezuela. The Curaçaoan population exploded from 30,000 in 1915 (Enock 1915) to 196,000 in 1959 (Bloomfield 1979). Since 1959 the workforce at the refinery has declined steadily, due in part to mechanization and in part to cutbacks. The decline in the refinery workforce, in a general sense, has been reflected in economic activity on Curaçao as a whole. Moreover, declining economic activity has tended to result in emigration. Thus, in 1992 the population had dipped to 144,097 (Netherlands Antilles Central Bureau of Statistics 1993), a decline of over 25 per cent in thirty-three years.

In 1985, Shell sold the refinery to the government for one Netherlands Antillean Florin (NAF). Afterward, it was leased to the Venezuelan national oil company, *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), which had nationalized Shell-owned oil production in Venezuela in 1975 (Holiday 1992). A new twenty-year lease agreement with PDVSA began in 1995. Extensive investments were made to modernize the plant. Still, the refinery provides one quarter of the foreign exchange earnings of the Netherlands Antilles (Economist Intelligence Unit 1994a).



The refinery also has been a source of considerable pollution. For example, smokestack particulates have eroded – in some cases, totally erasing – inscriptions on tombstones in the more than 300-year-old Jewish cemetery next door. Marugg (1960:99) writes:

The countryside of Curaçao has many smells, but they are gradually being ousted. By the tall factory chimneys of Willemstad, which, day in, day out, belch out their noxious black smoke, that is insinuated by the wind into every nook and corner of the island.

Since the wind normally blows east to west, the western side of the island suffers most. Some of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Curaçao, for example, *Wishi* and *Marchena* – that could be described as northern “suburbs” of *Otrobanda* – are directly downwind of the refinery.

Curaçao is semi-arid, with little potable water. Drinking water was a problem even in prehistoric times. The Caiquetio Indians, present at the time of Spanish contact, dug wells to find and to store water. They also used natural reservoirs, one of which – the cave of *Shingot* – is still used today (Goslinga 1979). Hyperextraction of ground water and the confinement of surface water due to damming for industry has led to salt intrusion (Morton 1967). Most current drinking water needs are met by desalinating seawater in an operation partly linked with the generation of electricity. Until 1893, when Leonard B. Smith, the United States Consul on Curaçao, constructed a water supply system, residents of Willemstad received water brought in cans by boat or donkey cart. In 1950, 20 per cent of that water was still from wells (De Haseeth 1991).

Average annual rainfall is only 21 inches (Gastmann 1978). Curaçao sits in an area of unusually low rainfall extending from the Orinoco River west along the north coast of South America to the Magdalena River. There are two rainy seasons: October through January and a short one in either May or June (Goslinga 1979). Curaçaoans I spoke with, however, consider the rainy season roughly to be equivalent with late fall and winter in the northern hemisphere. Curaçao and the other Dutch Leeward Islands are unusual in the Caribbean in that they have a winter rainy season (Blume 1974). On Curaçao, rainfall is generally local (Stoffers 1956), sporadic, and intensive (Herweijer, De Buissonje, and Zonneveld 1977). As the novelist Marugg writes (1960:11), “Idiotic island. For eight long months not a drop of rain falls, and then you suddenly get a cloudburst ....” Roads become quite slick when wet, and driving in the rain is especially hazardous. “There’s nowhere in the world where you can skid so easily as on the roads of Curaçao” (Marugg 1960:15). Intense downpours often overwhelm the drainage system and roads can be covered by what seems to be a foot of water. Generally, however, the rainy season is well liked. Flowers bloom and grasses grow. The temperature becomes more pleasant. Shortly after rain falls, however, the mosquito problem worsens. During the years 1982 through 1992, if we exclude 1988, the mean rainfall per year for the ten remaining years is 500.76 mm, and the average number of days per year

with rain is 68 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993b). Stoffers (1956) points out that if a drought is defined as less than 100 mm of rain in one month, then Curaçao has ten or eleven months of drought each year.

The average annual temperature is 81.4° Fahrenheit. September is the hottest month; January and February the coldest (Goslinga 1979). The temperature tends to vary more within each day than it does between seasons (Blume 1974). I found that over the course of a year, the only time I felt the need for a light coat or sweater was the night I camped out on a beach, though some people wore sweaters some evenings. Nonetheless, the steady trade winds at many times and in most places make the climate pleasant (Court 1982). Winds are from the northeast, usually at around 10 mph (Goslinga 1979), with the north coast being more exposed (Stoffers 1956). In fact, the trade winds make the climate bearable. Houses are oriented so as to make best use of wind to cool the rooms. Patios and roofed porches are common, and frequently are the main living area – both for daily household activities and for visitors. Central areas of the house often have the potential to open up, to be converted into partially open spaces. For example, a large roofed and floored room – with partial, interior walls on three sides between it and other rooms – may have the potential for a wall made of doors to open up onto an adjacent patio. This creates either an expanded patio or an expanded room, virtually without physical barriers between the two. Sitting in a windy spot also provides respite from the mosquitoes, which tend to seek sheltered areas to rest and to bite. The wind can be so strong, though, that especially along the coasts, houses are built to shelter residents from the wind as much as to facilitate the passage of wind throughout. In recent times, window – not central – air conditioning (*airko*) is becoming more widespread. Enclosed rooms become sanctuaries from both heat and mosquitoes. One woman – returning to live in Curaçao after years in the Netherlands – is disappointed in the way people now “hide” in their air-conditioned rooms and “watch television” rather than sitting on their porches and visiting one another. Marugg (1960:79–80) writes of the wind:

Even now, I still like listening to the wind, at silly moments. The wind's a part of the island. It's a wind which never gets tired, and which blows over Curaçao like a stimulating breath, fresh and thin in the cool rainy period, languid and hot in the warm September days, heavy and strong in the hurricane season. The wind which makes the tough acacia and divi-divi trees bow their heads in defeat; which takes on its wings the small boats laden with fruit and makes them cleave the waves; which sometimes sweeps the heat away like a great invisible broom, and drives the coolness of the sea on to the land, in its stead; the wind which catches the cotton-covered seeds that burst from the oblong pods of the kapok tree and sends them floating like little brown birds above the croton shrubs.

The wind is such a significant part of Curaçaoan experience that it is used to determine direction. The eastern half of Curaçao is called *band ariba*, literally “the upper

side,” but it also means “upwind” or “to windward,” while the western half of the island, *band abou*, “the lower side,” means “downwind” or “to leeward.” Directionality of wind flow – from east to west – is so ingrained that in Papiamentu *ariba* means east and *abou* means west.

The strong current flows from east to west past Curaçao at greater than 20 miles a day (Haviser 1987). The largely inhospitable north coast – which tilts slightly to the east – bears the brunt of both wind and current, showing the power of the two. Bare rock is exposed, there are few human dwellings, and sea travel is virtually impossible. The north coast is a place of awe and even death in the Curaçaoan imagination. Most prehistoric pictographs are along the north coast. During the course of my fieldwork, a widely publicized suicide occurred when a man drove off cliffs on the north coast. The north coast is a place for adventurous outings rather than for relaxation – a place to witness the force of nature. Nonetheless, Curaçao generally is regarded as outside the Caribbean hurricane area (Court 1982). However, hurricanes were recorded in 1807, 1877, and 1932 (Fortman 1982) and though it caused virtually no damage, one passed nearby in 1993.

Curaçaoan fauna still are being inventoried (Goslinga 1979). Before the Spanish there were no large animals except a small deer (Haviser 1987). Prior to the Spanish occupation the main food sources on Curaçao were a variety of snails and crabs (Gould 1971). Today, horses and cattle are present, but rare. Chicken and pig farming meet local subsistence needs (De Haseth 1991). In addition, goats roam freely throughout the island – even in the urban areas, though not in *Punda*. Goat meat is a favorite traditional food, usually stewed and served with rice or corn meal (*funchi*). Though the goats roam free, they are privately owned. In addition, there are many lizards, including iguana. The iguanas are an endangered species, with some legal protection. I am told that one is permitted to kill them only on one’s own property. Iguanas are considered by some Curaçaoans to be a delicacy – and to have medicinal properties, including conferring sexual potency on men. Many members of the Jewish community I studied denied ever eating it. I tried iguana once, in a soup. Underlying the strong lime flavor, it tasted, axiomatically, “like chicken.”

Morton (1967) describes Curaçao as largely overrun by xerophytic plants. Goslinga (1979) reports that Curaçaoan flora is similar to that of the nearby coast. Some of the better-known flora on Curaçao are the *divi-divi* (*watapana*) tree (an unofficial national symbol, that bends away from the wind), the brazilwood tree, aloe, agave, cacti, and the salt-loving manzanilla tree. *Divi-divi* branches also are remembered for being used to beat slaves (Paula 1987). When found by the Spanish in 1499, Curaçao was wooded. Overgrazing, low rainfall, erosion, salt-intrusion, and dammed surface water (Morton 1967) – combined with agricultural cultivation, tree cutting for export, and large-scale human settlement – now make Curaçao in one description: “small islands of lush green amidst the dreary cactus and thorn scrub savannas which cover the entire island” (Blume 1974:377).

Despite numerous attempts, agriculture is – and has been – a secondary economic activity. Throughout the historic period, the major sources of revenue

have been non-agricultural. Attempts to grow sugar cane failed early in Dutch colonial history. Tannin was once produced from the *divi-divi* tree. Hartog (1968:378) concludes that “as a source of revenue agriculture has become negligible,” and Blume (1974) writes that today there is little more than vegetable gardens and fruit trees. Yet, under cultivation currently are coconut, tamarind, guyaba, mango, and papaya (Goslinga 1979). One can find sorghum (*maishi chiki*), peanuts (*pinda*), and creole beans (*bonchi di kunuku*) on small-scale plots (De Haseth 1991). In addition, aloe is cultivated and iguanas are raised for export. Another well-known Curaçaoan agricultural product is Curaçao liqueur, made from the *Laraha* peel – a bitter orange brought by the Spanish in 1527 (Gastmann 1978). Today most Curaçao liqueur is produced synthetically off the island.

## Seú

Here, and in succeeding chapters, I describe a public festival or a public holy day that exemplifies Curaçaoan public signification and is related to the chapter topic. Agricultural activity and “traditional” Curaçaoan customs are celebrated in an annual harvest festival called *seú* (pronounced seh-OOH) that I describe in the fieldnote below:

It started near *Colon* in *Otrobanda*, and ended at the *Waaigat* (“Windy Hole”) parking lot. We saw the parade twice. Once in *Otrobanda*, then we walked alongside, passing the whole length, and saw it again at *Wilhelminaplein*. I think there were something like 20 or 30 groups. Not all groups had musicians. When there were musicians the basic instruments were the metal ends of hoes (carried by placing one’s thumb through the hole where the handle would have been) hit by metal beaters, and a drum (a small conga drum, carried wrapped in one arm). Sometimes there was also a conch shell, a wooden flute/pipe, or a metal rasper/grater. There were no real tunes; there was a beat that was steady, with call and response fitted in at times. The whole march took only about thirty minutes to pass, it was much shorter than *karnaval*, but had a pleasant, while exciting, casualness about it, that was helped by not being too crowded. There didn’t seem to be much drinking, nor did spectators dance that I saw, but it was fun. The kids and the costumes were so cute, the music propelled one, and the harvest symbolism was fun.

We’d arrived in town about 2:00 p.m. and not much was happening. The march finally started a little before 4:00 p.m. I hadn’t read, heard, or talked with anyone else who was going, except for Eric La Croes from AAINA, who helped organize and train the groups. Nevertheless, the crowd gradually built up, and there probably were 5,000–10,000 spectators in total (my estimate). I’d guess that there were about 200 participants in the march. Maybe one-third to one-half were small kids. There were mixed-sex groups, and groups with mostly women. I think virtually all the musicians were men. There were a

couple of groups of old women. At times, the groups would stop and do a little show: a kind of *tambú* dance; or, a dance mimicking harvest-like movements.

The costumes were nice. They basically were dolled-up peasant dress – bright-colored long dresses that were the same for all the members of a particular group. The men wore matching, simple shirts and pants, which, again, were the same in any one group. Some men wore dashiki-like shirts. Some men carried stalks of corn or small corn [sorghum], one group of men carried lightweight canes. Many women carried baskets; some of them carried the baskets on their heads. I went up to one old woman and asked her what was in her – fuller than many – basket: guava, papaya, tamarind, small corn, melon, and a few other things.

One of the song responses was “*mama yora*” (mother is crying), another was “*pa bo isa*” (for you Jesus), and another was “*lomba wesu kai*” (bend spinal cord). One woman carried a scarecrow (*spanta para*), which a bystander said stood for *Kai Man Djuku*, the *seú* deity. Yesterday, however, Eric told me that *Kai Man Djuku* is not a scarecrow and has nothing to do with *seú*. *Kai Man Djuku* is a tough ferocious character in African-derived, Curaçaoan *nanzi* stories.

Most groups carried a banner in front with their name. Many were from schools; one was from a dance teacher. Others were names that didn’t tell me anything about where the groups were from.

I saw no Jews in the crowd or in the parade. Almost all the marchers were dark-skinned. I don’t remember seeing a white-skinned face. The crowd, too, mostly was dark-skinned. The white-skinned faces seemed like tourists. A few people had set up chairs or a bench along the march route well before it began, but very few, and no booths like for *karnaval*. Since the parade was brief, it was easy to stand. Also, because it wasn’t too crowded, it was easy to see. Unlike *karnaval*, we bystanders were allowed to walk across the pontoon bridge. There were police at the beginning and end of the march. There was a *seú* queen at the beginning of the march, along with her “court.” They walked. There were no floats or vehicles of any kind, except for the police. There was, however, one group that wheeled old-fashioned wooden wheelbarrows, and a small booth was pushed at the end.

The *seú* parade mimics and transforms – in a shortened route – the *karnaval* parade. It occurs each spring after the “rainy” season. In 1992, *seú* was celebrated on April 20th. It honors Afro-Curaçaoan agricultural endeavors and rural customs, thereby promoting Afro-Curaçaoan solidarity. Performance – in dress, on instruments, through song and movement, of music and dance that are reconstructions of traditional, rural, Afro-Curaçaoan practices – serves to promote Afro-Curaçaoan memory, pride, and political will. Visual and auditory senses are engaged directly by the parade with its music and dance, and the marchers’ bright-colored costumes. The senses of taste, touch, and smell are hinted at through displays of harvested goods. Indeed, spectators perceive a “synchronic narrative”

through a variety of senses; one perceives an expression of a rich and textured culture and history. This reconstituted cultural experience generates a cultural imagery that engenders Afro-Curaçaoan power and Afro-Curaçaoan social praxis. It argues for an agricultural connection to the land often deemed insignificant and unimportant in mainstream discussions of the national economy, while the limited participation of Curaçaoans in *seú* indicates that local agricultural bounty is not a subject of great interest to many Curaçaoans.

### The prehistoric, human, setting

Venezuela was a crossroads of the prehistoric western hemisphere, central to understanding Caribbean cultural developments (Wagner 1978). Most aboriginal Caribbean people at the time of European contact had come from eastern South America, displacing peoples from Central America and, though unlikely, possibly from Florida (Gorenstein 1981). Pre-contact residents of the extended Caribbean region are classified into Paleo, Meso, and Neo groupings (Gould 1971). Paleo-Indians (17,000–7,000 B.P. [Before Present]<sup>1</sup>) hunted large mammals, and were not supposed to have been seafarers, but remains have been found in Hispaniola, far from the South American continent. Meso-Indians (7,000–3,000 B.P.) used bone rather than stone only, and were seafarers. Neo-Indians (from 3 or 4,000 B.P. until European contact) had pottery and a developed agriculture based heavily on manioc (cassava). These dates denote periods when the specific corresponding traits were in widespread use, but are not absolute, exclusive periods. Meso-Indians, for example, were found on Hispaniola at Contact, 2,500 years after the end of the Meso-Indian period.

Neo-Indians moved to the Venezuelan coasts about 6,000 to 5,000 B.P. (Gorenstein 1981) and the Caribbean islands around 3,000 or 2,000 B.P. (Gould 1971), displacing the Meso-Indian inhabitants and gradually pushing Meso-Indians northward, up the Antilles. At some time within the last 2,000 years, Neo-Indians switched to maize, an improved protein source that may have allowed a large population increase in eastern Venezuela, in the Orinoco River floodplain (Roosevelt 1980).

The Caribbean area, including the Venezuelan coast, generally was a better source for fishing, hunting, and gathering than the mainland. Neo-Indian Caiquetios, speaking Arawakan languages, are assumed to have occupied Venezuela's Paraguaná Peninsula, the Dutch Leeward Islands, and what is now the Venezuelan coastal state of Falcon. Paraguaná pottery changed over time from painted to fabric-impressed (Osgood and Howard 1943).

Haviser (1987) provides an overview of Curaçaoan prehistory, with an island-wide survey of pre-contact and contact sites, and information from several excavations. Two Archaic Age sites date from 4,500 to 3,800 B.P., corresponding with Meso-Indians. Ceramic Age sites, corresponding with Neo-Indians, date from about 1,400 B.P. to European contact (Haviser 1987).

Evidence at three Meso-Indian middens (Gould 1971) indicates that residents

probably placed a species of snail horizontally on surfaces and struck one end of the snail shell with an implement. This broke the end off and allowed the preparer to suck the snail out. The same species of snails were found at inland sites in Venezuela, where they could not have occurred naturally, leading Gould to conclude the existence of reciprocal trade.

Archaic Age peoples probably organized themselves into small, semi-nomadic, kin-based bands (Haviser 1987). Precipitation probably was somewhat greater than today, supporting about 150 to 200 people speaking a language unknown to us. They preferred to inhabit elevated rock shelter areas with access to, and in view of, mangroves and inland bays – two important locations for subsistence resources (Haviser 1987). Burial sites associated with this period are found in middens. The bodies found were placed, loosely flexed, on their sides, often with rocks around and above the body, and without grave goods. We do not know what happened to the Archaic Age inhabitants of Curaçao, but it seems likely that the island was abandoned for over 2,000 years after their presence (Haviser 1987).

Neo-Indians were called “Caiquetios” when Europeans arrived (Goslinga 1979). They were Ceramic Age people who spoke a language from the Arawak linguistic family. These people fished, gathered shellfish, and produced agave liquor. They bartered with South American coastal dwellers for fruit, vegetables, and manioc in exchange for whelk shells and edible snails in a continuous traffic between the islands and with the mainland. On *Klein* (“Little”) Curaçao, a tiny nearby island, they hunted seagulls and sea turtles. Axes, chisels, and knives were made from basalt, nephrite, and sometimes jasper. Fish hooks and combs were made from wood or fish bone. Nephrite stones were used for talismans and body ornaments. Ceramic female figures presumably were used in necklaces. They wove textiles and made pottery, but did not use pottery wheels. A settlement at *St. Barbara* reveals the remains of salt pans. Politically, they were connected with, but not subordinate to, the mainland Caiquetio Chiefdom (Haviser 1987). Ceramic Age peoples tended to settle in one location for longer periods, forming semi-autonomous, horticultural local communities of about 200 to 250 people. Settlements were located along major drainage areas, near inland bays (Haviser 1987). Burial was close to dwellings, within the settlements, and sometimes was in urns. In direct burials, bodies usually were flexed, and grave goods were common (Haviser 1987).

Both Archaic and Ceramic Age peoples preferred bases near inland bays; Archaic Age remains indicate a “mangrove-rock shelter” emphasis, while Ceramic Age remains show a “suitable soils-drainage basin” emphasis (Haviser 1987). There are about a dozen pictographic sites on Curaçao. Most are located near the airport, in an area called *Hato*. Inside the rock walls displaying these pictographs is an impressive series of caverns full of stalactites and stalagmites that has been developed as a tourist site.

The first European contact with Curaçao occurred in 1499 during a Spanish expedition led by Alonso de Ojeda. The navigator Americus Vespucci, in a letter which is of disputed reliability, reported that the aborigines were very tall. Early



Spanish maps labeled Curaçao, *Isla de los Gigantes* (Island of the Giants) (Goslinga 1979). At that time there probably were about 2,000 indigenous people spread among Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire. Most were exported to be slaves on Hispaniola in 1513 after Diego Columbus, viceroy of the Spanish empire in the New World – seeing the islands had no gold – declared the islands useless (*islas inútiles*) (Goslinga 1979). In 1528, there were about 400 Indians on Curaçao. Then, after the Dutch took the island from the Spanish in 1634, about 400 Indians were deported to Venezuela with the Spanish. About seventy-five Indians were allowed to remain, and in 1795 only five “full-blooded” Indians could be found on Curaçao (Goslinga 1979). Several native Arubans that I met were proud of what they claimed was a more widespread “Indian” ancestry on Aruba, in comparison to what they felt was a greater prevalence of “African” ancestry – without Indian intermixture – on Curaçao. From population figures, it is possible that Spanish deportation of Indians from Curaçao was more widespread than from Aruba and Bonaire (Haviser 1987).



## Selected elements of the Curaçaoan social setting

### Historical and contemporary

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#### Rudy's ta otro (Rudy's is other/different)

*Joe'i Kòrsou?*

Maria Liberia Peters *Isla Riba African pura sangre auténtiko*

Faroe Metry *Arabir pura sangre*

Dito Mendes de Gouvea *mitar Kòrsou Blankoe mitar Portugues*

Errol Cova *nacé Kòrsou Venezolano auténtiko pura sangre*

Ewald Onga Kwie *Sumam Chines Afrikano*

Rudy Plaate *Africa, Hulanda, Hudieuw-Indjian*

Layo Capriles *Hudieuw pura sangre*

Chati Constancia *Africano pura sangre*

Gibi Basilio *onbekent ...*

*Awo nos ta pone tur den Blender, shake nan y esei ta Joe di Kòrsou.*

*Stop di pompa awo ken ta yoe'i Kòrsou.*

*Nos konteiner a jega pa tur esnan ku to riba e lista aki y e otro nan.*

Danki

Rudy Pajarito Plaate

(Advertisement for Rudy's Grocery Store in Bala,

a Papiamentu-language newspaper on Curaçao, October 23, 1992.)

#### *Translation*

[Native] Curaçaoan?

Maria Liberia Peters – authentic pure-blood Dutch Windward Island African

Faroe Metry – pure-blood Arab

Dito Mendes de Gouvea – half White Curaçaoan half Portuguese [Madeiran]

Errol Cova – Curaçaoan-born authentic pure-blood Venezuelan

Ewald Onga Kwie – Suriname Chinese-African

Rudy Plaate – African, Dutch, Sephardi Jew–Native American

Layo Capriles – pure-blood Sephardi Jew

Chati Constancia – pure-blood African

Gibi Basilio – unknown [in misspelled Dutch] ...

Now we put every one in a Blender, shake them and they are Curaçaoan.

Stop nagging now over who is Curaçaoan.

Our container [of groceries from off the island] has arrived for all those on this list and others.

Thanks

Rudy Pajarito Plaate

The names at the start of the first nine lines are those of well-known Curaçaoans, including that of the advertiser himself. Many of those mentioned are politicians. Maria Liberia-Peters was Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles during my fieldwork. This piece is a wonderful illustration of the widespread recognition of ethnic identity and of the practice of ethnic classifying on Curaçao. As an advertisement, it indicates the general acceptance of ethnic classifying. Plaate figures that the people and the ethnic groups mentioned will not be offended to the point of avoiding his store. Indeed, one of his aims may be to attract customers by implying that his store is a place to meet people of many and differing ethnic identities, a place at which to find uncommon groceries for uncommon people. His store had a reputation as a place that stocked unusual or specialty items. In addition, the hint of danger invoked by mentioning ethnic identities probably helps draw the attention of readers to the advertisement, thus meeting the advertising function of the piece. Danger is invoked further because the advertisement reflects the current struggle over who is a “real” Curaçaoan. Native-born Afro-Curaçaoans, from whose labor other Curaçaoans have profited for so long, are demanding a larger piece of the economic “pie.” Being only part Afro-Curaçaoan, Plaate probably does not wish to lose power or prestige to “pure-blood” Afro-Curaçaoans. Moreover, as expected in a business person who hopes to maintain good relations with as many potential customers as possible, Plaate argues that all these individuals – and many more not mentioned – are “real” Curaçaoans, no matter their differing ethnic identities. Plaate wants people of all ethnic identities to feel welcome at his store. To achieve that, people of varying ethnic identities must be able to get along with each other.

This chapter is arranged around five elements that significantly shape Curaçaoan social life. First is an overview of colonial politico-economic history. These events formed the basic social setting now present on Curaçao. Second, industrialization – chiefly begun with the construction of an oil refinery on Curaçao in the early twentieth century – dramatically altered the social setting. Industrialization led to rapid population growth, largely due to laborers who arrived from elsewhere. Social categories shifted. Industrialization also led eventually to political autonomy. Governmental institutions are the third element shaping Curaçaoan social categories discussed below. The next section covers Curaçaoan labor history, including slavery and a 1969 labor riot with roots in slave relations. Social categories that derived from a slave economy provide the context within which I discuss the slave trade, the use of slave labor, the treatment of enslaved

people, slave revolts, manumission, and emancipation. The 1969 riot should be seen from the perspective of the history of labor relations on Curaçao. In the final section, the politics of language is discussed. Rhetoric about language usage and choice reflects basic social understandings, conflicts, and values. It is another view on Curaçaoan social cleavages and groupings.

The above five elements are manifestations of social structure, economy, politics, and culture. Whether historical or contemporary, they reflect and contribute to the shape of the Curaçaoan social world. Social groupings are positioned by means of these activities into a social landscape, into Curaçaoan understandings of the ethnic groups present on their island.

## **Colonial history**

Most authors (e.g., Anderson and Dynes 1975; Goslinga 1979; Paula 1972) describe colonial Curaçao as consisting of three significant and separate social groups: black Afro-Curaçaoans, now mostly Catholic, who descended from slaves or were enslaved; white, Dutch, Protestants; and white, Portuguese Sephardi Jews originally from the Iberian Peninsula.

Authors often present the Sephardi and the Dutch as rival elites, similarly situated in Curaçaoan society until the construction of the oil refinery. The Sephardi engaged in much of the income-producing activity of the island – though they did not hold full Dutch citizenship until 1825. In contrast, elite Curaçaoan Dutch – until the construction of the refinery, and except for the slave trade – were engaged largely in military affairs and civil administration. Sometimes the Dutch are divided into elite and working-class social strata, for there were small-business operators, crafts-people, and laborers who were Dutch, but were not accepted as social peers by the Dutch elite.

There have been internal social divisions within the Sephardi, too (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970), but in the scope of the island-wide social system, internal Sephardi social difference largely has not been significant. An economic elite maintained broad authority over the activities of a “not inconsiderable” number of impoverished Sephardi (Kaplan 1982:205). Though stratifying, this practice also served to produce cohesion.

Afro-Curaçaoans have been distinguished socially on the basis of several criteria. These include whether one was enslaved or free, black or mulatto, well or poorly educated, an urban or rural resident, and foreign- or native-born. In addition, criteria include, if mulatto, whether one’s paternity was recognized, whether one’s father was Dutch or Sephardi, and whether the father contributed materially to one’s support.

The Caribbean region is unusual in its nearly complete replacement of the indigenous population. Thus, the social categories brought to Curaçao (rather than indigenous ones) predominated. These categories then were altered in conjunction with subsequent immigrations to Curaçao. Probably no non-European came freely to the Caribbean, and no Caribbean resident was consulted about

whether new residents should come (Mintz 1981). The Caribbean region also is characterized by many-directional migration – to a variety of other islands, back, and to other islands, for example. Residents are accustomed to strangers. Many people – or their ancestors – have left a homeland and cannot return, yet remain aware of their origins. Caribbean culture includes many Western characteristics (Mintz 1981). Peasants of the Caribbean differ from most other peasantry. They are not indigenous – originating instead via emancipation from slavery – and they previously raised cash rather than subsistence crops (Van den Bor 1979). Curaçao generally follows these patterns, as well.

There are, however, several exceptions to the general similarity of Curaçaoan colonial history and the history of other Caribbean islands. The semi-arid climate of Curaçao resulted in an economy based less on cash crops. Sugar was not “king.” There were fewer plantations than elsewhere, and those that existed often were not profitable. Plantations often were maintained primarily to provide status (Paula 1972). Though the Dutch colonized a virtually depopulated island, the absence of a plantation-based economy meant that Curaçao did not have the same need to import labor – usually enslaved Africans – as elsewhere in the Caribbean. Curaçaoan economic activity centered instead around *Schottegat* harbor and trade. Many enslaved Africans were brought to Curaçao, but most were kept in camps temporarily until taken elsewhere to be sold. Though there were a significant number of slaves on Curaçao, the number did not reach as high an African-to-European ratio as on islands where sugar was the major economic activity. For example, in 1789 – prior to the Haitian Revolution – on Saint-Domingue there were 40,000 people from Europe, 452,000 enslaved Afro-Caribbeans, and 28,000 “freed” people of African descent (Williams 1970). In 1816, there were just over two slaves per white person on Curaçao, while some British Caribbean islands of the time had ten enslaved people per white (Anderson and Dynes 1975).

In 1526, Juan Martinez de Ampues resettled the by then depopulated Curaçao for the Spanish. He brought animals and fruit trees to the island in an attempt to establish subsistence techniques that depended on slave labor (Goslinga 1979). Shortly thereafter, Venezuela was given to the Welsers – German bankers – by Spain to repay debts. This left Curaçao in limbo. Politically it was under Spanish jurisdiction, but the religious seat of power was with the bishop in Venezuela. Spain did not attempt further development (Giacalone 1990; Goslinga 1979).

In 1621, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) took over the management of Dutch Caribbean matters. The WIC, unlike the Dutch East India Company, was primarily a tool for war and privateering against the Spanish. Privateers obtained permits to attack specific national enemies in return for the right to keep all goods they captured. They were not under a centralized military command. Colonizing and commerce were only of secondary interest to the WIC (Goslinga 1979).

Thus, Dutch conquest of Curaçao in 1634 was not resisted strongly by the Spanish, who had little incentive to retain Curaçao. The reasons the Dutch, unlike the Spanish, were interested in Curaçao were based on salt and shipping. The Dutch herring industry – an important segment of the Dutch economy – had lost

its source of salt when Portugal and Spain became allied in opposition to the Dutch. Portuguese colonies no longer would export salt to the Dutch, and attempts to procure salt elsewhere were thwarted.

The Dutch thought the *Schottegat* useful. The port was sheltered and deep-water, and could serve ships engaged in intra-Caribbean trade and those operating between the Dutch colonies at Pernambuco, Brazil, and New Amsterdam (New York). Thus, the Dutch decided to hold the island against the advice of the local military commander, who felt it extraneous. The change in colonial ownership severed trade between Curaçao and Venezuela for the time being (Goslinga 1979). Over 250 years later, Curaçao's harbor and location again were key factors in a strategic economic decision. In this early 1900s example, Royal Dutch Shell, when considering where to construct a refinery for oil extracted in Venezuela, decided to build on Curaçao.

The 1648 peace between the Dutch and the Spanish, in addition to the loss of Pernambuco to the Portuguese in 1654, lessened Curaçao's importance to the Dutch (Goslinga 1979). Moreover, peace led the WIC to lose its major reason for being. It was reorganized as the New WIC (NWIC), and now pursued mercantilist policies that led it to reap large profits from the slave trade over the next half-century or so. Though the NWIC was fairly "weak" and "peace-minded" in the Caribbean, along the west coast of Africa the company was "an extremely aggressive, hostile, and vindictive institution, ready to use every means at its disposal to maintain or extend its power and position, and to irritate, crush, annihilate, suffocate, and strangle its opponents in every way..." (Goslinga 1985:48).

The NWIC de-emphasized Dutch settlement on Curaçao. However, a steady influx of laborers, craft workers, and artisans continued to arrive to fulfill local needs (Goslinga 1985). Then, the Dutch loss of Pernambuco to the Portuguese indirectly brought a new group of settlers to Curaçao: Jews fleeing from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions.

The first Jewish settlers arrived in 1651, but the first group of consequence, twelve families, arrived on Curaçao in 1659. The NWIC had entered into a contract with these Jews that provided land upon which they could settle and cultivate (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970; Goslinga 1979). However, cultivation never became the major subsistence practice among Curaçaoan Jews (see Chapter 4). Goslinga (1985:239) writes about what happened:

Though they never abandoned agriculture, most Jews soon also turned to trade and navigation as a more dependable and steady source of income .... Soon a strong class of Jewish merchants emerged, which contributed to the well-being and prosperity of the island to no small degree.

The strength of the Jewish merchant lay in his having capable and dependable representatives and agents in Amsterdam and other European and American cities. Generally they were relatives – sons, brothers, brothers-in-law, or cousins – with whom sometimes a partnership was entered into. He also shipped his merchandise in his own vessels, thus reducing the costs

considerably, while he always had the advantage of knowing the commercial language of those days: Portuguese.

The 1667 Peace of Brecht was followed by a period of severe restrictions on Curaçaoan Dutch trade by the English and French, who sought to monopolize trade with their colonial possessions. By 1678 the Curaçaoan economy depended on the slave trade and salt. The NWIC reaped profits from slaves, but food was scarce and sold for exorbitant prices on the black market. Numerous, mostly unsuccessful attempts were made to impose new subsistence strategies (see Chapter 4). Attempts were made to consolidate trade with New Amsterdam, but its and Curaçao's residents each found it more profitable to trade with closer partners (Goslinga 1979).

Although risky and subject to fluctuating periods of success – such as those just mentioned – the most stable source of income remained trade rather than agriculture. This might be illustrated by residency. In 1789, 11,398 people lived in Willemstad – consisting of *Punda*, *Otrobanda*, *Scharloo*, and *Pietermaai* – while of the 8,146 residents in the remainder of Curaçao, 7,445 were slaves (Goslinga 1985:509). Euro-Curaçaoans had more reason to settle in town than on plantations. In a general sense, this pattern continues today. Most Curaçaoans live in urban areas, and Curaçao cannot provide for its own nutritional needs. Import-export figures illustrate this, in addition to the residency patterns mentioned above. During the years 1955 through 1959 Curaçao imported food worth between 24 and 28 million NAF (Netherlands Antillean Florin; since 1973 fixed at 1.79 NAF to 1 USD) while exporting goods worth only 37,000 to 139,000 NAF (Bloomfield 1979). By 1991, imports of food, beverages, tobacco, and oils totaled over 116.5 million USD in value, while exports of those items were worth only 8.4 million USD. In 1992, then, imports of these items reached over 181.4 million USD (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993b:41).

The eighteenth-century Curaçaoan economy continued to revolve around trade, and was influenced directly by wars and political alliances. Sometimes war crippled trading opportunities. Sometimes war was a boon to Curaçao, such as during the American Revolution, which opened a formerly closed market. Willemstad in the 1760s was a cosmopolitan meeting place and commercial center for pirates, American rebels, Dutch traders, Spaniards, and Sephardi Jews. However, by late in the century it became clear that – like the WIC – the NWIC had lost its reason to exist. The slave trade had been taken from the Dutch, and war with Spain had long ceased to be an activity of the WIC. After a combined 170-year existence, the (N)WIC was disbanded in 1791 (Goslinga 1979, 1985).

Political upheavals in what is now called the Netherlands, divided and shifting alliances among Dutch and Curaçaoans with the English and the French, and the French Revolution produced political uncertainty in Curaçao toward the end of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century Britain stepped in to take control. It ruled Curaçao from 1800 to 1803 and again from 1807 to 1816.

Throughout the nineteenth century trade remained the economic mainstay.

Curaçaoan and Venezuelan products were exchanged for European goods. Curaçaoan shoes and straw hats were traded for provisions and wood from the United States. Methods of contact with other locations changed along with technologies. The first transatlantic steamship service began in 1827. It connected the Dutch Leeward Islands with the Netherlands and Suriname. Curaçao's first regular mail service to the Netherlands began in 1825.

At times, Curaçao was a place to start a revolution from, or flee to. It is geographically and culturally close to Venezuela, yet politically distant. South American political rebels, including Simon Bolivar, took refuge on Curaçao (Goslinga 1979). Later, in 1929, another Venezuelan revolutionary, Rafael Simon Urbina, seized control of Fort Amsterdam in *Punda*. He negotiated safe departure for his group and the arms they confiscated in the fort, but met defeat in Venezuela (Giacalone 1990). Events such as these tended to complicate trading relations between Curaçao and Venezuela.

The number of plantations on Curaçao decreased from 362 in 1828 to about 100 in 1865. The emancipation of slaves in 1863 made plantations even less profitable, though some profited as suppliers of sand or water. Emancipation, however, did not affect the numerous merchants greatly. Shipbuilding and repair increased in importance. Fishing was an important industry, as was phosphate mining, which began after 1871. Then, in 1882 the *Derechos Antillanos* (Antillean Duties) were imposed by Venezuela on goods shipped from Curaçao to Venezuela – a 30 per cent surtax on goods imported from, but not produced in, Curaçao. This severely harmed trade with Venezuela (Gastmann 1978), though its effects were moderated by smuggling (Goslinga 1979). During the succeeding century this tax continued to be enforced in varying degrees. Finally it was abolished in 1974 (Giacalone 1990).

Despite the *Derechos Antillanos*, significant economic and personal ties remained between Curaçaoans and Venezuelans (Giacalone 1990) and Spanish-language influences, particularly from Venezuela and Colombia, were present in Curaçao in the form of Spanish-language schools and literature (Römer 1991). Contacts with the South American mainland have been a constant in Curaçaoan history, and during the late 1800s and the early 1900s this influence may have been at its peak. Spanish-speakers have immigrated to Curaçao at various times and now constitute recognized groups, but the effect of population movement and contacts has been more cultural than social. Spanish-speakers have been integrated into Curaçaoan social groupings based on class and race, more than having forged new social alignments.

During the three or so decades prior to oil refinery operations, the economy stagnated and emigration rates were considerable. Early in the twentieth century, this included migration to Cuba to participate in the sugar boom, first by Sephardi and then by Afro-Curaçaoans. The three major social categories on Curaçao did not change significantly during the colonial period, including during the half-century or so following emancipation. There were Dutch, Jews, and Afro-Curaçaoans. The first two groups included all of the island elite, whose members



continued to vie for status. Emerging class differences led to internal differentiations within each of the three groups, but bodily phenotype, religion, history, kinship, and language kept each of the primary three groups apart from the others.

## Industrialization

Oil refining revolutionized the Curaçaoan economy, had significant effects on social life, and had an eventual impact on Curaçaoan political structure (Broek 1999). Social groupings became more fragmented and temporary. Some immigrant groups and Afro-Curaçaoans attained greater relative prestige, power, and income. “A relatively high percentage of well-to-do Dutch [serves to] perpetuate colonial social patterns,” writes Sedoc-Dahlberg (1990:4); however, the elite status of the Dutch has become contested and somewhat diminished. Sephardi, too, have lost economic and political power with industrialization. Finally, gender relations were altered; in general, women’s control over economic resources decreased, though individual women have become wealthy or powerful politically.

The decision to build a refinery was made in 1915. It opened in 1917, and by 1923 production was carried out on a continuous basis (De Haseth 1991). Royal Dutch Shell located the refinery on Curaçao because it was close to the Maracaibo oil field less than 200 miles away in Venezuela, and because it had a stable government, a good climate, no malaria, and was 800 miles closer to Europe and 200 miles closer to the city of New York than is Houston, Texas (Goslinga 1979).

Oil refining brought more middle-class and elite Dutch to operate the refinery; contemporary Western culture; wealth; the need to import greater amounts of food (Goslinga 1979); Portuguese laborers (Gastmann 1978); and unemployed persons from around the Caribbean. Descendants of slaves left the plantations to work as unskilled laborers in the refinery (Römer 1991). Afro-Curaçaoans and Sephardi returned from Cuba. Suburban residential neighborhoods that followed class lines were constructed around *Isla* and around the *Schottegat*. Mainly white Dutch managers lived in some neighborhoods while separate housing was built for skilled and for unskilled workers. After World War II, new refining-oriented installations were built and the airport was expanded. Infrastructure improvements contributed to post-war economic prosperity (Karner 1969).

As a result of the refinery – during both war and peace – funds became available to improve Curaçaoan infrastructure. However, crafts, home- and small-scale industries, agriculture, and stockbreeding suffered because of the oil refinery. Never extremely profitable, the wages in those industries no longer were competitive (Gomes Casseres 1984; Van Soest 1981).

The oil refinery became the economic monoculture. Table 1 shows remarkable fluctuations in Curaçao’s population. In 1929 the refinery employed 11,000 people, while the total population of Curaçao was 44,000 (Gomes Casseres 1984). The number of refinery employees reached a peak of 14,000 in the early 1950s, declining to 1,700 in 1967 (Goslinga 1979) – in 1966, the total population was 136,289 (Marks 1976). In 1994, under the Venezuelan national oil company,



Table 1 Population of Curaçao

<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of people</i>
~2250–1850 B.C.	~150–200 “Archaic Age” Native Americans
1499 A.D. Spanish arrive	~2,000 total on the three “ABC” Islands “Ceramic Age” Native Americans
1785–89 A.D. WIC about to disband; Tula about to lead a revolt	~8,500–19,544 Virtually no Native Americans
1863 A.D. Slavery abolished	19,144
1915 A.D. Immediately prior to refinery	~30,000
1940 A.D. World War II	67,317
1959 A.D. Just past peak of refinery operations	~196,000 Multiple ethnic groupings present
1992 A.D.	144,097

Sources: ~2250–1850 B.C. (Haviser 1987:147); 1499 (Goslinga 1979:5); 1785 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:277); 1789 (Goslinga 1985:509); 1863 (Hartog 1968:414); 1915 (Marks 1976:109); 1940 (Marks 1976:109); 1959 (Bloomfield 1979); 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993:10).

**Note**

~ Denotes an approximation.

*Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), *Isla* employees and outside suppliers on Curaçao numbered more than 2,300 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1994a). To compare, the employed population of Curaçao in 1992 numbered 51,642, out of which 6,143 worked in the manufacturing sector, which includes the refinery (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993a:11).

Industrialization dramatically altered gender relations (Abraham 1993). Women’s work, such as hat plaiting, became marginalized. Women increasingly became dependent upon men for their subsistence. The refinery hired few women, and those it did were placed in lower-paying positions. Legal marriage and child-birth to married women increased significantly. In 1917, 51.4 per cent of all births on Curaçao were to unmarried women, dropping to 23.9 per cent in 1952 (Abraham 1993:94). The refinery had adopted policies supporting marriage. Legal wives and children born to married parents could receive free medical care; if the husband/father died, they were entitled to a pension.

As the refinery scaled back its operations women increasingly became impoverished disproportionately, and fewer women married. By 1985, the mothers of 52.7

per cent of all children born on Curaçao were not married (Abraham 1993:104). Recent trends find some women doing well financially, working in a variety of positions previously considered suitable only for men. However, the unemployment rate for women is higher than for men, fewer women are supported financially by men, and extended families are less extensive – less cohesive and penetrating in organizing social life. Industrialization in Curaçao first made working-class women more dependent on men, then decreased the economic bonds between men and women, and currently relegates unskilled women to particularly tenuous economic situations (Abraham 1993).

In contemporary times, the people of Curaçao create revenue through a variety of industries that involve trade, trans-shipment, service, or alteration of something brought from elsewhere. No oil, for example, is drilled on Curaçao; it is brought to Curaçao, refined, and shipped onward. An exception to this pattern is the phosphate mine on the *Tafelberg*, an extractive activity. Mining, fishing, and agriculture together employed only 411 workers in 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993a:11).

Offshore banking and financial trust institutions are a significant sector of the Curaçaoan economy, and another service industry. Banking, insurance, and business services employed 6,156 workers in 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993a:11). Offshore trust institutions manage offshore companies. In offshore banking, money earned elsewhere is deposited in Curaçaoan banks, but not invested in Curaçao. Offshore banking

involves transactions such as lending, pre- and post-export financing, import financing, [and] money market deals ... which are performed by companies that are either located outside the country or established [in Curaçao] as an offshore company which is in most cases managed by a trust company.

(Schutte 1992:91–92)

The government taxes the profits on investments, but at a lower rate than either where the capital was accumulated or where its owners reside. The government receives income it would not have received, and numerous white-collar jobs are created. The relatively recent offshore banking sector reaped a great deal of profit at first. However, beginning in the late 1980s, profits began to decrease. Both the Netherlands and the United States of America changed their tax laws to make this activity less profitable for the owners of capital. The average annual growth in tax revenues from the offshore sector increased about 38 per cent per year from 1980 through 1985, and declined about 5 per cent per year from 1988 through 1990 (Holiday 1992). Part of the motivation for changes in tax law was to reduce the opportunities for drug dealers to launder profits. Still, in 1992 there were about 20,000 offshore companies in Curaçao. The Curaçaoan offshore industry in general has a good reputation in restricting criminal transactions (Pourier 1992), illustrated by the 1991 signing of a voluntary Code of Conduct (Schutte 1992).

A variety of hub-type operations exist on Curaçao. The transport, storage, and

communication sector employed 3,412 workers in 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993a:11). *Schottegat* harbor remains important economically. Goods containers are brought by sea, and about 30 per cent of them are re-packaged and trans-shipped. New avenues for trade opened up with the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. Curaçao became a bunkering station for ships passing that way (Blume 1974). Ships are repaired in the Curaçaoan dry dock. Buyers come from elsewhere in the region to purchase goods in the Curaçao tax-free zone. Until the 1983 devaluation of the Venezuelan bolivar, individual Venezuelans came in large numbers to purchase goods at lower cost in Curaçao. Curaçao is attempting to become a regional telecommunications center – some fee-for-service telephone operations are routed through it. There have been hopes that Curaçao would become a gateway for goods entering the European Economic Community (EEC), to which the Netherlands Antilles, through its relationship with the Netherlands, has belonged since 1964. The Dutch airline, KLM, operates a training facility for its employees on Curaçao.

Tourism and gambling also fit this revenue-creating pattern. Economic activities categorized as trade, restaurants, and hotels employed 12,555 workers in 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993a:11). Called “service” industries, they involve movement – rather than production – of people, funds, services, and goods, and have periodic ups and downs. Tourism is a substantial factor in the Curaçaoan economy. At present, cruise-ship tourism is secondary to stopover tourism. Most stopover tourists come from the Netherlands. The number of tourists from the United States has declined since the 1970s (Holiday 1992). The International Trade Center (ITC) of Curaçao was opened in 1988 (Holiday 1992). It hosts professional meetings, trade shows, and performances, and occasionally screens movies. Finally, drawing retirees (*penshonados*) to reside in Curaçao has been a recent source of income. The retirees most often come from the Netherlands. A variety of regulations ensure that the retirees make a significant economic contribution to the island in exchange for their tax breaks. For example, in the early 1990s, *penshonados* had to spend at least 250,000 NAF to build a new house, deposit a minimum amount in local, not offshore, banks, and hire a maid to work at least three days per week.

In 1992 – during the period of my research – these and other activities resulted in a relatively low rate of unemployment in comparison with recent years (Table 2). The rate of unemployment in 1992 was 14.2 per cent, down from 16.4 per cent in 1991 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1993b), 19.8 per cent in 1990 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1992), 21 per cent in 1989, and from 24.4 per cent in 1988 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1991). In 1992, the Curaçaoan economy was characterized as “recovering strongly” since the late 1980s (Daal 1992:141). However, the picture was not as positive as the figures suggest. In 1991, the definition of unemployment was changed. Since that time one must have applied to work in the previous months to be counted among the unemployed (Abraham 1993).

One picturesque constant remains. Though supermarkets sell produce brought in containers from around the world, Venezuelans bring over fruits and vegetables

Table 2 Recent unemployment

Year	Percentage of population unemployed
1988	24.4
1989	21.0
1990	19.8
1991*	16.4
1992	14.2

Sources: 1988, 1989, and 1990 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1991:32); 1991 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1992:32); 1992 (Economist Intelligence Unit 1993b:49).

Note

\* New method of calculating unemployment is initiated (Abraham 1993:102).

just as was done during Meso-Indian inhabitation of Curaçao. They dock their small boats along the *Ruyterkade* – a street along a small channel in central Willemstad. They sell their produce under brightly-colored awnings stretching from boat to sidewalk.

The variety of economic activity has made Curaçaoan social structure less static than in the colonial period before the oil refinery. Ashkenazi Jews, pejoratively called “*polako*” (Poles) – though most were from elsewhere in Eastern Europe, came in the 1920s and 1930s. “*Portuguese*” from Madeira came in the early 1920s. A small number of a different kind of Sephardi came from the Middle East early in the twentieth century, as did people from Syria and Lebanon, called “arabs” or “*libanese*,” both Christian and Muslim. Large numbers of English-speaking women came from the British West Indies to work as maids on Curaçao from the 1940s through the 1960s (Philipps 1992), and Sranang Tongo speakers came from Suriname (Römer 1991). English speakers from the Caribbean were called “*batiyandi*” or “Somebody” (Römer 1991), or “*beegee*.” In recent decades – as the 1992 census makes clear – small but significant numbers of people have come from other regions. By local name, there now are “*hindus*” from India and “*chines*” from Taiwan.

These social groups stereotypically are associated with a type of business or occupation. For example, some “*portugues*” started as gardeners upon arriving in Curaçao and now are said to own most of the island’s supermarkets. “*Surinamers*” are reputed to be well educated, working as schoolteachers and in governmental offices. “*Libanese*” are said to have a corner on the furniture market. “*Hindus*” are visible in the free trade zone (Abraham 1992) and in retail businesses, particularly in electronics – operating some stores previously owned by Ashkenazi. “*Dominican*” women are brought over to work for three-month periods in the government-sanctioned prostitution operation, *Kampo Alegre* (Happy Camp) (Kempadoo 1998), while “*dominican*” men are said to work illegally on construction sites. “*Venezolanos*” also are said to be present illegally, to work in low-prestige occupations, yet they appear to

have higher status than “*dominicans*,” possibly due to the presence of high-status Venezuelans and to the influence of Venezuela in the Curaçaoan economy. Relatively impoverished immigrants – such as those from Venezuela or the Dominican Republic – often perform menial tasks, often for lower wages, that *yu’i Kòrsou* are thought not willing to do. A corollary to this pattern is that *yu di Kòrsou* are sometimes thought to be lazy or complacent; for example: “In comparison with countries like the United States and Japan, the average Antillean lacks a drive to compete with others to excel in a particular field. Very often we are happy with mediocrity” (Palm 1992:111).

“*Makambas*” – the pejorative term for people from the Netherlands – come to Curaçao for a variety of high-status, professional jobs, such as judge or doctor, and to work in banking or as consultants. Young Dutch people may work illegally in service positions. It is a travel destination where they can be understood in their native language, can find work, and can go to clubs and to the beach.

On the other hand, young Curaçaoan adults often go to the Netherlands. There they can pursue higher education, and those unable to find work are eligible for economic support. An Afro-Curaçaoan middle-class, often trained in the Netherlands, has arisen in recent decades. Its members may or may not be mulatto. It includes college-educated professionals of many types, business people, and politicians. According to Verton (1990a:63), “Now there is a heterogeneous community in which skin color and position on the social scale are not coupled as they were in the past.”

In short, industrialization has fragmented the previous social system. The three prominent social groupings of the colonial period have been broken up, added to, and transformed. New groupings have achieved elite status. Significant immigration and emigration have altered Curaçaoan demographics. Sedoc-Dahlberg (1990:4) writes that “In the Netherlands Antilles ... social stratification is dependent upon ethnicity.” New “maps” of social difference have been brought to the island; a changing population has produced new social imperatives; education, travel, tourism, and international business operations have brought native Curaçaoans in contact with additional ethnic hermeneutics. The tri-partite colonial social system has passed. In general, one now may be Dutch (*makamba*), *yu’i Kòrsou* (Native), or a member of one of a variety of other groups known to be present.

## **Karnaval**

Social relations have out-paced ideologies of social difference. These new, small groupings blur the social boundaries. Boundaries of race, religion, national origin, and even language are crossed frequently. One consequence of this has been the construction of a discourse of national unity. One site of this discourse is the annual *karnaval*. The rhetoric of *karnaval* builds on the theme of Curaçaoans being one people. From my fieldnotes:

In the newspaper, *Extra*, of March 3, 1992 (Tuesday), page 8, there was an article titled *Politika mester usa frutanan positivo di karnaval pa formashon di nashon* [Political leaders must use the positive fruits of carnival for nation-building]. The article summarizes statements by Winston S.S.D. Lourens of *Movimentu Solidaridat*, a member of the *Staten*. He says that *karnaval* is a time for society to renew its strength and health. *Carni-valls* means “*deshast di karni*” (overeating of meat) [sic]; it means to put everyday things aside and focus on spiritual affairs, as a time of purification. During this time, masked and disassociated, one can do things that at other times would lead to ridicule, derision, or disapprobation. In an atmosphere of community solidarity, one can let out frustrations. Tolerance increases. Lourens claims that spiritual reasons to celebrate *karnaval* have decreased. He argues that nowadays the moving force behind *karnaval* is economic. Now that Curaçao *karnaval* is 22 years old, it has “come of age.” Earlier, *karnaval* here was for the “elite.” It was a matter of small groups doing things, not in a mass way. Now, each year’s *karnaval* is a process of socialization. Lourens argues that politicians should make use of this opportunity for “cementing solidarity” to construct a united house for the Curaçaoan nation.

Lourens’ point is that *karnaval* is a rite of passage Curaçaoans traverse each year that functions to revitalize national solidarity. Rudy Plaate’s plea, contained in the advertisement presented at the outset of this chapter, echoes Lourens’ interest in forming a sense of nation by bringing ethnic groups together. Below I transcribe the *karnaval* I saw from my fieldnotes. It is the second public rite of intensification, laden with signification, that I describe in the three setting chapters. The *karnaval* I saw looked like this:

Saturday night, February 29, 1992, people started gathering and walking around in *Otrobanda*. It was pre-*karnaval*. Excitement was high. Some bands played. There was a huge crowd in the street and everyone was friendly. You could hardly walk, because the street was so crowded. Tuesday, ten days earlier, at 10:00 a.m., people could stake out spots on the parade route. [The time was set by the Lt. Governor as 10:00 a.m. on the Tuesday before the children’s march.] They built booths, tied chairs down with chains along the street, and reserved spots from which to watch the parade. That Sunday afternoon was the children’s parade (*March Hubenil*).

The following Sunday the parade began at 10:00 a.m. There were 57 groups. Some groups included over 200 people. There were a few groups that consisted of a few people in a car. Other than those few, each group had a theme for its costume. Several themes were related to the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to the Americas. Most of the groups started with a float upon which was either a live band or a disk jockey playing tapes or compact discs. Those first floats blasted music behind to the dancers who walked in the street. Sometimes a group had more than one float. A second float might have

beauty queens, or be a theme float. Then there would be more dancers. Finally, at the end of each group was a truck with food and drinks – both beer and non-alcoholic drinks – for the people marching in the parade.

The Curaçaoan *karnaval* is accompanied by new music composed annually for the event. The music follows a *tumba* rhythm, a beat I was told was distinctive to Curaçao. Just over one month prior to *karnaval*, the *Tumba* Festival is held, sponsored by the Curaçao Music Association. The *Tumba* Festival struck me as the closest thing Curaçao has to the American “Super Bowl” in professional football. The analogy may seem odd. The similarities are that both are competitions, competitors are backed by devoted fans, and the events are discussed widely by the general public and in the media.

Some told me – and others disputed – that each group was required to play the “Roadmarch,” the winning song from that year’s *Tumba* Festival, at least four times an hour during the parade. [A spokesperson from the *Fundashon Karnaval*, the *Karnaval* Commission, later informed me that groups are instructed to play the Roadmarch “most of the time,” but that there is no set frequency.] Boy Dap, a singer, won this year’s *Tumba* Festival with his song, *bòltu e blachi* (Turn the Page). Another popular song from this year’s festival was, *bisti bo sombré* (Put on your Hat). However, there was controversy over the song *kumpli kune* (Comply with it/her/him) by Peter van der Pligt, a Dutchman. *Kumpli kune* was very popular, it was lighthearted and fun, and the performance by Van der Pligt – because of his Dutch, stiff mannerisms – was a crowd pleaser. Despite this, Van der Pligt did not make it to the finals in the *Tumba* Festival. Supporters of the judges’ decision said that the winning song should be a product of Curaçaoans, and not of outsiders. The judges insisted that Boy Dap won on merit, and that Van der Pligt did not have as good a song. Still, *kumpli kune* was played quite a bit during the parade. Apparently all the attention paid to Van der Pligt angered Boy Dap, 70, a perennial winner of the festival, and he is reported to have said that he would “take care” of Van der Pligt after the parade. Conflict between the singers was averted. Boy Dap, who insists on walking the whole parade rather than riding on a float, fell down and was injured during the parade.

I had a number of nice experiences with people during *karnaval*. I planned to walk all around to see how as many people as possible were celebrating the parade. That is not what others do. Generally one finds a spot with family and friends, brings food and drink, and spends the whole parade there. Many of the Jews watch from a store or house along the route; that way they do not have to contend with the crowds so much. *Casa Leon* (a store) in *Otrobanda* is popular with many Ashkenazi due to its second-floor balcony. There are Sephardi who watch from the windows of Sephardi homes in *Pietermaai*, a neighborhood in *Punda* along the parade route.

I packed food and water in a backpack and drove to *Otrobanda*. Once there



I decided that it would be silly to walk around all day with a backpack, so I went with just my cap, after putting on sunscreen. Several people were selling straw hats on the way to the parade. The prices were extremely low – 3–5 NAF. I think the hats are a kind of custom for the parade – as in the song, *bisti bo sombré*. I reached the beginning of *Rodeweg*, a street in *Otrobanda*, when the sixth or seventh group passed. I peered around a platform built about five feet above the ground. The platform was made out of metal pipes fit together so that it could be constructed and torn down in a matter of minutes. There was a railing on the top, and people stood on a platform of wood placed across the metal poles. Backed up to the platform was a station wagon. Two women sat on the station wagon roof. The back door was open and there was a cooler within easy reach inside. I stood next to the platform to view the parade. A woman sitting on the top of the station wagon beckoned me up to see better. I climbed on the tailgate. She said, go all the way up. I did, and I stayed and watched the whole parade from there. It took about three more hours to pass by completely. The platform was a great vantage point, and the company was good, too. There were four women, one man, two young girls, and myself on the platform. They had a good time and made me feel like I belonged without forcing themselves on me. They offered me drinks and a *saté* (a kind of kebab). Any time my drink ran out they gave me another. I mostly drank orange juice, but the man drank whiskey. The people were very dark-skinned, and didn't seem like they had a lot of money, but they were perfect hosts to their white-skinned anthropological guest. We never exchanged surnames. They were amused that I took so many pictures and that I let one of the two little girls take a half-dozen pictures.

At one point the tongue from a trailer broke right in front of us, at a turn in the parade. It was being drawn by a forklift. Police and members of the *Fundashon Karnaval* tried to move things along, but it took a while to move the cart. Eventually, they turned the forklift around, and tied the hitch of the wagon to the poles of the lift with a chain. The wagon was drawn the rest of the parade by the forklift, with the forklift traveling backwards. I heard that further along in the route, one float was too high to fit under a bridge in *Otrobanda*. They had to let all the air out of the tires and then continue. Only one group at a time was allowed across the pontoon bridge and no spectators were allowed to follow groups across the pontoon bridge, because the weight would have endangered it.

The parade went all the way to the Princess Beach Hotel, a distance of about five or six miles. The last group reached the end after 6:00 p.m. I walked around in *Otrobanda* a bit after the parade passed me. I went to a friend's and spent an hour. From her apartment window, she saw the groups lining up prior to the parade. She also watched some of the parade on television. After I left her apartment, the streets were quiet. People had packed up and left quickly. I guess that few followed the *karnaval* to other spots. I did not feel comfortable hanging around *Otrobanda* – it was mostly the drunks that stayed late. There



were reports of a few fights – probably associated with drink – but, on the whole, for such a large crowd that was drinking so heavily, the event was remarkably calm.

The next day was a national holiday; everyone had the day off. That evening was the children's *despido*, or closing of the *karnaval*. Tuesday evening was the adult *despido*. It, too, began around 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. in *Otrobanda*. It crossed over to *Punda* and went around the *Waaigat*, finishing up in the *Waaigat* parking lot. This I watched from the street at the corner where the parade came up to and started to go around the *Waaigat*. Although there was a certain rudeness at times, with people pushing or dropping garbage, there also was a norm of behavior that kept people from bothering each other most of the time. When someone left temporarily, space was made for him or her in their previous spot when they returned. Also, once people had their spaces, no one tried to push in front of anyone else. It was mostly the front row of spectators who danced. I had one or two people between the street and me, so did not dance. Spectators in the front also moved around a bit, sometimes walking along the parade route a while. The rest of us could not do that, because there was no way to get to the front. This parade was in the dark. Each group was rigged with generators and bright lights to illuminate the dancers behind the float.

Once, in each of the parades I watched, a marcher recognized me and stopped and waved. I took each of their pictures. Other marchers, too, waved at spectators they recognized. Maria Liberia-Peters, Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles, was in the parade, without special guard. *Fundashon Karnaval* told me that 6,000 people marched in the parade, and that there were about 60,000 to 70,000 watching the parade on the street. This means that about one-half of the total population came out for the parade, which seems like an amazingly high proportion.

Shortly after midnight Tuesday a straw man on a raft – *Momo*, the “King” of *Karnaval* – was pulled into the middle of the *Waaigat* and set alight. There were fireworks that rose from inside *Momo* as he burned, and more fireworks were set off from the shore, for an exciting show. After that, everyone gradually found their rides and went home. The burning of *Momo* signals the end of *karnaval* (Fat Tuesday), and the beginning of Ash Wednesday (“*djarason shinishi*”). Some referred to this as, “*kima Momo*” (burning *Momo*), others as, “*ayo Momo*” (goodbye *Momo*). In either case, setting *Momo* on fire represents the end of *karnaval* and the beginning of Lent. To draw on Lourens’ analogy, it also represents the end of a rite of intensification in the path to national unity.

The thing I find most interesting about *karnaval* is that it seems to be the real “national holiday” here. It is the public, communal celebration of Curaçaoan-ness, while Christmas and New Years are the family-oriented national celebrations. For *karnaval* there is an incredible amount of people doing and preparing for the same thing, which ends in an open, public display available for all to watch. Reruns of *karnaval* were on television for several

days. Later, there were a number of prizes for the groups, including: "Most Creative Idea," "Most Original Idea," "Idea With the Greatest Impact," an overall winner, and winners for body pieces, walking pieces, food and drink bar, best commercial float, best individual, best group, and more.

Lourens seems to have it correct.<sup>1</sup> *Karnaval* is an island-wide rite of integration. Around one-half of the total population watched or marched in the parade in 1992. More participated in other *karnaval* events and watched on television. Discourse and activity celebrate and promote social cohesion. *Karnaval* groups are not divided ethnically. School, club, workplace, interest, etc., organize the constituent groups in the *karnaval* parade – not ethnic identity and not race or religion. This is seen and remarked upon with pride. Anyone may join almost any group. One only need be prepared to invest the required time and money. People say, "We are all one people." Spectators, too, apparently are well mixed by ethnic group. They demonstrate rhetorical unity by tolerance and good cheer toward those present. Numerous contests and preparatory activities mean that the rhetoric of *karnaval*, the rhetoric of solidarity, extends for one to two months, not just on the day of the *karnaval* parade. Indeed, at lesser intensity, discussions of *karnaval* and preparations for it continue year-round.

### Political organization

Increased economic independence due to oil refining spurred demand for political independence in Curaçao (Van Soest 1981). Current political relations and blocs are tinged by race, class, religion, and nationality of origin, but the dominant factors dividing political parties are island affiliation and patronage.

Curaçao and four other islands currently constitute the Netherlands Antilles, a legally equal – but politically and economically dependent – partner in the tripartite Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Netherlands Antilles is autonomous, but not wholly independent. The other partners in the Kingdom are the Netherlands and Aruba. At the inception of this arrangement Suriname was a partner, too, while Aruba was a member of the Netherlands Antilles. Suriname declared independence and withdrew from the Kingdom in 1975. Aruba became autonomous in 1986, when it became the third member of the Kingdom. Aruba received its portion of Netherlands Antillean property, but apparently is not economically viable enough for, and did not seek, complete independence from The Kingdom of the Netherlands as scheduled in 1996. The four islands other than Curaçao that constitute the Netherlands Antilles are another Dutch Leeward island, Bonaire, and the Dutch Windward Islands of Saba, Sint Eustatius – often called "Statia" – and about one-half of Sint Maarten (Saint Martin). The Dutch Windward Islands are located a little over 500 miles northeast, while Bonaire is approximately 25 miles east of Curaçao. Part of the island of Sint Maarten is a province of France. French and Dutch St. Maarten share a single airport.

The transition to autonomy largely has been smooth. Dutch colonial Curaçao

was ruled by the WIC, then directly by the Dutch Crown. Generally, a governor was appointed to administer Curaçao and the remaining Dutch Caribbean colonies, with lieutenant governors stationed on the other islands under the governor's supervision. An early governor, familiar to readers in the United States, was Peter Stuyvesant. He was appointed in 1642, but resided on Curaçao only a short time (Goslinga 1979).

In 1865 – shortly after the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands Antilles, and one year before Congregation Mikvé Israel would split in two – an advisory council to the governor was formed. This council achieved increased independence in 1937 when five of the 15-member council – now called the *Staten*, “States” (also the current term for the Netherlands Antilles parliament) – were selected by the governor, the remaining ten being elected by a limited popular vote. Approximately 6 per cent of the male residents of the time were eligible to vote due to their income or educational level (Verton 1990a). Universal adult suffrage was achieved in 1948, and the Netherlands Antilles attained autonomy in 1954.

Sephardi Jews played significant roles at a number of junctures in this process. Abraham M. Chumaceiro, a Sephardi Jew, published widely a call for universal suffrage in 1892. Three Sephardi were elected and two appointed during the transitional period of the *Staten*, 1937–48 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). In addition, *Rooi Catootje*, a plantation house owned by Sephardi, was the site of many of the negotiations over the *Statuut* (Statutes), or regulations establishing the original tri-partite Kingdom of the Netherlands (S.A.L. Maduro Foundation 1989).

In general the Netherlands Antilles has control over its internal matters while the Netherlands is responsible for external affairs. In practice this division is not so neat. Sedoc-Dahlberg (1990:1) remarks that the “Dutchification” of former Dutch Caribbean colonies continues “in the legal system through the judicial framework; in domestic development policies through planning and development aid; and in the social structure through family networks connecting Holland with the Dutch Caribbean.”

In matters of defense, for example, Curaçao has a small voluntary defense force, *Vrijwilligers Korps Curaçao* (VKC; Volunteers Corps of Curaçao), in addition to housing a Dutch naval and marine base. The Netherlands Antilles operates no embassies of its own, relying on the Netherlands to conduct a portion of its foreign affairs. Yet, the Netherlands Antilles has its own foreign service, which places representatives in some Dutch embassies, and holds separate talks with foreign trading partners.

As for internal affairs, considerable financial assistance from the Netherlands endows it with significant influence in the Netherlands Antilles. From 1964–75, over 1,800 million NAF in Dutch development aid was received by the Netherlands Antilles (Badejo 1990). In 1986, the figure was 232.2 million NAF (Sedoc-Dahlberg 1990), and the Dutch development budget for the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba for 1993 was 275 million Dutch guilders (1 Dutch guilder is worth slightly more than 1 NAF) (Economist Intelligence Unit 1993a). In comparison,

the Netherlands Antilles central government raised a little over 825 million NAF in taxes and revenues in the year 1991 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993b:41).

Furthermore, the Netherlands has a Minister for Antillean and Aruban Affairs who, in July 1992, convinced the Dutch government to put Sint Maarten under "direct rule." A Dutch commission found that budgets were prepared after expenditures already had been disbursed, the administrative structure was inadequate, and the government was insufficiently democratic. Beyond this, evidence was mounting that the Italian mafia and drug traders had considerable influence in the Sint Maarten government. The Governor of the Netherlands Antilles – who resides in Fort Amsterdam in Curaçao, and who holds an otherwise largely ceremonial position – was given a mandate to oversee the governance of Sint Maarten more directly. He had to approve all expenditures over 25,000 NAF (about 14,000 USD), reporting to the Dutch Minister for Antillean and Aruban Affairs. Members of the government of the Netherlands Antilles opposed this intervention in their sovereignty, calling it neo-colonialism – as did politicians on Sint Maarten. However, there was considerable popular support in Sint Maarten for the action.

In geographic size, and especially in population, Curaçao dominates the Netherlands Antilles. Of the 22 seats in the *Staten*, 14 are allocated to Curaçaoan representatives. Bonaire has 3 representatives; Sint Maarten, 3; and Statia and Saba have 1 each. After coalition agreements are reached between parties represented in the *Staten*, Netherlands Antillean governmental ministers – approved by the *Staten* – form the "government" (*gobiernu*) and take over the top administrative posts of governmental departments.

In addition, each island has a legislative council, *Eilandsraad* (in Dutch), or *konseho insular* (in Papiamentu). The Curaçaoan legislative council has 21 seats; Saba and Statia each have 5-seat councils; and Bonaire and Sint Maarten each have 9-seat councils.

Administrative power at the island level rests in the office of *Gezaghebber* (director, administrator – usually translated as "Lieutenant Governor"), who is in effect much like a mayor or city manager in the United States. The Dutch Queen appoints the *Gezaghebber* for each island for a six-year term upon the nomination of the ministers of the Netherlands Antillean government. The Lieutenant Governor is the leader of the *Bestuurscollege*, the appointed executive council of governing ministers ("deputies") at the island level. I am told that by custom a *Gezaghebber* will not have held elective office prior to his appointment and will not have been active on behalf of any political party. However, the position of *Gezaghebber* is quite powerful.

There was a marked political rivalry between Curaçao and Aruba until Aruba became autonomous (see Croes and Alam 1990). De Haseth (1991:164) quotes Gorsira on the subject: "Although the distance between the islands is not great, it appears that the waters around them are too deep." With a population of 60,312 in 1981 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 1983), Aruba could not compete with Curaçao for resources and power on a consistent basis. On the other hand, Curaçao had a constitutionally based disadvantage in comparison to its absolute

population advantage and economic strength. The original Netherlands Antilles *Staten* had 18 seats: where 8 were designated for Curaçao, 6 for Aruba, 2 for Bonaire, and 2 to be shared by the three Windward Islands. Curaçao had less than one-half of the seats. However, Curaçao contributed 70 per cent of the total budget at the time of autonomy (Goslinga 1979) and its population was approximately twice the size of Aruba's.

Inter-island differences, disparities, and power struggles continued after the departure of Aruba from the Netherlands Antilles, and re-evaluations of the constitutional structure have been a frequent part of Antillean history (see Verton 1990b). In 1992, during my fieldwork, a non-binding plebiscite was scheduled in Curaçao. Citizens were to vote on the political organization of Curaçao in relation to outside entities. The four choices that made the ballot were:

- 1 complete independence;
- 2 Curaçao in a direct, autonomous relationship with the Netherlands, without responsibility for the other current members of the Netherlands Antilles – a *status aparte*, much like Aruba;
- 3 maintain the status quo – the current five islands comprising the Netherlands Antilles, all within the Kingdom of the Netherlands; and
- 4 become a Dutch province.

Every major Curaçaoan political party supported a change in political structure. They wanted to eliminate the costs of governing the small islands of the Netherlands Antilles. Some Curaçaoans opined to me that the Dutch government opposed this change because it would require the Netherlands to establish an extensive bureaucratic structure to govern a small number of people. The Island Council of Statia publicly announced that it was in favor of continuing the existence of the Netherlands Antilles as presently constituted, even claiming that if every other island withdrew it would continue to regard itself as a member of the Netherlands Antilles. Public opinion was stirred up against the present arrangement. Many people questioned why the Curaçaoan economy should be drained to support other islands. Also, people were told that a Curaçao that stood alone – though *not* one completely independent from the Netherlands – would not need to continue the current two-tiered governmental structure. Instead of both a national and an island parliament – instead of overlapping and confused boundaries between the responsibilities of national and island-level agencies – there would be only one level of government. Governmental costs would decrease and service responsibilities would become more clearly defined.

For a variety of reasons the balloting was delayed until November 1993, when I no longer was in Curaçao. Voters overwhelmingly chose to stay in the present political arrangement. This decision may have included the understanding that continued association with the Netherlands would protect Curaçao from the full projection of US power and, simultaneously, afford Curaçao latitude in its relations with metropolises (see Allen 1990). The clear loss of popular support of the ruling

coalition led to its dissolution, the appointment of an interim government and, in February 1994, the political ascendancy of a newly created reform party, *Partido Antiya Restruktura* (PAR; Antillean Party for Structural Reform). In October 1994, the other four islands also voted to maintain the current constitutional political order.

Curaçaoan political parties are associated with class more than with ideology, and their popularity largely depends upon the popularity of the leader (see Marks 1976). Political struggles in the Netherlands Antilles – much as in the rest of the Caribbean (Allen 1990) – center on attracting voters through patronage (Moreno 1992; Verton 1990a). The patronage system significantly distorts political process and bureaucratic efficiency. What group affiliations might be found, or claimed by Curaçaoan political parties have included Roman Catholicism, the middle or the working class, birth on or outside of Curaçao, residence in Willemstad or in *Band'abou*, and the labor movement.

Two Sephardi Jews were elected to the *Staten* in the late 1940s. Other Sephardi were elected by the *Staten* to serve on the executive committee of the island council, the *Bestuurscollege*, in the early years after universal suffrage (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). Jews have been influential in governmental affairs, but one man tells me that few Jews now campaign or stand for office because there are few Jews on Curaçao. They do not constitute an effective political elective block, and as owners of businesses they are vulnerable to a variety of repercussions from political opponents. Still, in 1994 a young Sephardi Jewish woman was elected to the *Staten* as a member of PAR, the party formed in response to the recent constitutional referendum.

Prior to an election, each party prepares a numbered list of its candidates. Voters vote for the party they prefer, and each party wins the number of seats proportional to the votes received. Local social categories significantly, but not overwhelmingly, constitute distinctions people make as they determine political loyalties. Most important in the political electoral system is patronage and island residency within the Netherlands Antilles. This would seem to indicate that identities formed by religion, race, socioeconomic issues, and place of birth are somewhat malleable. A key point to keep in mind is that, within the political realm, the boundaries of social classifications are permeable and subject to redefinition.

## Labor history

Laborers on Curaçao were oppressed severely for about three centuries, a condition that would change only in conjunction with the oil refinery. In the years between the opening of the refinery and the riot in 1969, some social change occurred. The population grew approximately seven-fold, immigrants came from around the Caribbean and elsewhere, per-capita income rose, political autonomy and universal suffrage were instituted, and the middle class expanded to include an increasing number of Afro-Curaçaoans. Then, in 1969 the system of social relations on Curaçao began to alter more rapidly.

Current labor relations, as well as social relations more generally, are shaped by memories of the 1969 riot. Since that time, power has become more widely distributed. Now, social “class,” in addition to race and ethnic identity, is an increasingly significant factor in the social landscape. The tri-partite social system I have discussed has become more complex. A social world apparently limited to three significant distinctions – Sephardi, Afro-Curaçaoan, and Dutch – no longer exists. The point in time at which these changes in social structure most clearly became or began to become manifest was the 1969 riot. In the imagination of current Curaçaoans, the 1969 riot is a kind of “touchstone.” They know it as an event that affected significantly their relations with other Curaçaoans. It is not difficult to find documented examples of social change in the wake of that event – whether in the political arena, in labor laws, or in rituals of integration such as *karnaval*.

In this section, then, I focus on Curaçaoan laborers, looking at their social conditions in historical context in order both to demonstrate social change and to present some of the influences on the current social landscape.<sup>2</sup> Changes in the lot of laborers will reflect and correspond with changes in the lot of other local social groupings. Moreover, since labor is a key component in any system of production, its access to capital and its organization must be considered in studies of ethnic identity. For example, in order to comprehend the “place(s)” of Jews in the Curaçaoan social landscape, it will be useful to look at the place(s) of laborers, and at what status and understandings have been attached, by whom, to the work of Curaçaoan laborers. Social groupings and distinctions are produced and constructed to a significant degree in conjunction with the ways in which economies are structured to produce goods and services. Though Jews have not constituted the bulk of the Curaçaoan labor force, Jews have been deeply connected with Curaçaoan laborers. Both have been intertwined in the Curaçaoan economy, with the consequence that their social relations have been intertwined in a similar fashion. Thus, group relations within a system of production will help to shape the ethnic identities present within that social system.

The Curaçaoan economy relied significantly on the labor of enslaved persons from late in the seventeenth century until 1863.<sup>3</sup> In addition, after the abolition of slavery in 1863, Afro-Curaçaoan former slaves continued to live in difficult conditions until the labor shortages of the early twentieth century – though some enslaved people had been freed prior to the general emancipation and were earning a modest income (Goslinga 1979).

Unlike many other slave societies in the western hemisphere, Curaçaoan slaves were neither encouraged nor allowed to participate in their owners’ religions, usually the Dutch Reformed Church or Judaism. However, slave-owners recognized that African and creole religions could support slave resistance, so eventually they encouraged slaves to join a western religion that most owners did not practice, namely Roman Catholicism (Goslinga 1979). Most enslaved people received some education and were baptized Roman Catholic prior to emancipation in 1863. Today, though a variety of Protestant Christian denominations are present, the most frequent religious affiliation among Afro-Curaçaoans remains Roman



Catholic. Current religious-based social distinctions, though less salient than other indices, contribute to the understandings of the Curaçaoan social landscape, and of ethnic identity. As such, being Catholic carries connotations of island social history. For example, for some it may include a sense of solidarity with workers or identification with the legacy of slavery. The widespread existence of a private Catholic school system – in addition to its obvious role in maintaining Catholic identity – may reflect the role that Catholic priests historically fulfilled in the education of Afro-Curaçaoans.

Slaves may have been treated better on Curaçao than elsewhere in the Caribbean due to the limited amount of plantation farming (Anderson and Dynes 1975; Goslinga 1979, 1985; Lowenthal 1972). Curaçaoan slaves may have been somewhat better fed, clothed, housed, and less severely punished than other enslaved people in the western hemisphere (Allen 1992b). Generally, relatively few people were enslaved per Curaçaoan owner. In 1735, 73 per cent of slave owners had fewer than 5 slaves, and only one had more than 100 slaves. In 1863, 62 per cent of slave owners had fewer than 5 slaves, and only eight enslaved more than 100 people (Allen 1992b). Some Curaçaoan slaves worked inside households, some worked in businesses, some were artisans, and relatively few were forced to perform numbing, backbreaking work. Occasionally, a will would manumit some slaves after an owner's death – this, it should be noted, did not include citizenship for the former slave. Some slaves “purchased” freedom when owners credited to them the cash received by the owner for work performed by the slave for others on the island (Paula 1972). Other slaves were granted freedom as a result of ties of affection. For example, a mistress or the child of a mistress might be manumitted; if not, the owner's paternity might be admitted and the two enslaved people might receive preferential treatment, or a mulatto son might manage a commercial enterprise.

However, slavery was an inhumane institution (Paula 1972, 1987), whether or not it was relatively less brutal on Curaçao. The misery and suffering of Curaçaoan slaves should not be minimized through comparisons with other, harsher systems of slavery. Old and sick slaves sometimes were manumitted in order to free the owner from the obligation to care for them. At times this was done when the owner was in the midst of an economic crisis (Paula 1972). Curaçaoan slaves were beaten, forced to labor, denied the right to marry, sold to others, raped, not admitted to owners' religions, and not taught Dutch until the nineteenth century. Such conditions led some enslaved people to risk their lives to escape to the South American continent where, legally, they could be free. In addition, there were two slave rebellions on Curaçao – one in 1750, the other in 1795. There is a memorial to the leader of the second revolt, Tula, on the south coast just west of *Otrobanda*. Paula (1972:26) reports Tula's sentence:

He should be taken to the place of execution and bound on a cross and from head to feet broken upon the wheel, then scorched in the face, while the head should finally be cut off and put on the gallows.



It appears that Curaçaoan elites of the time wished to instill such fear in slaves that no one would arise to lead another revolt. The success of this tactic may have been great. Indeed, Tula's actions seem not to be widely acknowledged even today. For example, while erected relatively recently, the Tula memorial had not been well cared-for at the time of my visit. I found it only by accident while exploring the island. The memorial's location is out of the way of passers-by and I saw no mention of it in tourist brochures. This apparent communal forgetfulness may be reflected in the reluctance to violently disrupt Curaçaoan social order as inferred from the 1969 riot (described below).

The mid-1700s were a turbulent time in Curaçao (Goslinga 1979). A war began between Great Britain and the Netherlands in 1739 that abruptly reduced Dutch trade. Ships were sunk nearby during the hostilities, but Curaçao was not attacked directly. Peace was declared in 1748, but that did not end civil strife on Curaçao. The extended period of social unrest probably contributed to a slave revolt in 1750. Congregation Mikvé Israel was in turmoil during these years (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). Civil disorder prior to the revolt also could be seen among Afro-Curaçaoans – they were purported to be robbing graves in 1747 (Goslinga 1979:63). Thirty-four leaders of that revolt were executed in 1753 (Hartog 1968). Tensions remained high in the ensuing decades. Nominal legal protections for slaves were written, but not well enforced. Restrictions were placed on the activities of free Afro-Curaçaoans as well as on those who were enslaved.

Social conflicts and uncertainties contributed to the second slave revolt, as well. The WIC was liquidated in 1791. The Dutch government began to rule Curaçao, but with a weak hand. Effective control of the administration and police passed to the local elite. Then, in 1795, supporters of the French Revolution ascended to power in the Netherlands and Prince Willem V of the Netherlands left for England. Curaçaoan Dutch were divided between supporters of the House of Orange, and those who were pro-French (Goslinga 1979). Inspired in part by the French cry for liberty and the temporary abolition of slavery in French Caribbean colonies in 1794, Curaçaoan slaves once again resisted slavery in 1795 (Hartog 1968). Tula led fifty slaves from the *Knip* plantation, which was on the southwest coast, took the name of Rigaud – after General Benoit Joseph Rigaud of Haiti, and was joined by Bastiaan Carpata. After a few days, over a thousand slaves on the western, rural part of Curaçao were in revolt. A priest, Jacobus Schinck, unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a settlement. He was authorized to offer each rebel a pardon, provided they resumed work at once. Tula's counter-demand was the abolition of slavery on Curaçao, as on Saint Domingue (Haiti). Schinck remained for a night before returning from the rebel camp, and was treated well. The rebels "sang French songs of freedom, but in undertones, so as not to disturb his sleep!" (Hartog 1968:126, exclamation in original).

A larger body of troops was sent. The slaves were defeated. On the small island of Curaçao, there were few places for them to elude the militia, and no chance for them to establish a defensible enclave – as slaves in Jamaica had done. The majority of them were back at work a month after the revolt began. Eventually the

leaders were betrayed in exchange for rewards. Twenty-nine leaders of the revolt were led through the streets of Willemstad and sentenced to death after a short trial (Goslinga 1979; Hartog 1968). Fewer were executed than after the less successful, less violent revolt of 1750. Tula's sentence is recorded above. During slavery, labor was oppressed with a heavy hand. Those seeking to change the system were unsuccessful, sometimes losing their lives.

Furthermore, slavery severely compromised the ability of the enslaved to reproduce their cultures. The Roman Catholic Church, which taught so many slaves to read, whipped and expelled some who did not follow Church rules. Afro-Curaçaoan customs, ceremonies – such as *seú* – and drummed music (*tambú*) were considered “vicious and uncivilized” (Allen 1992b:6). Roman Catholic priests sought to eradicate such customs (Allen 1992b).

However, Allen (1992b) reports instances of “coded resistance,” in which cultural – rather than physical – means were employed as an outlet for pent-up feelings. Songs sung by slaves are examples of coded resistance. The singing of certain songs enabled the enslaved to transcend their oppressive conditions, create consensus and warmth, and express opposition to slavery. At the time of Tula's hanging, after the 1795 slave revolt, the song below reportedly was sung by house slaves in Papiamentu at the request of their owners (Allen 1992b:8):

*Papa Siwe, At'é negru tribí ku a lanta ku blanku*  
*Papa Siwe, At'é negru tribí k'a lanta ku blanku*  
*Mat'é*  
*Hork'é.*

Allen's translation:

Papa Siwe, Look at the insolent slave who stood up against the whites  
 Papa Siwe, Look at the insolent slave who stood up against the whites  
 Kill him  
 Hang him.

“Papa Siwe,” of course, represents Tula. The song appears to express a gleeful, bitter satisfaction at the murder of such an “insolent” slave as Tula, especially since it was being performed for slave owners. However, according to Allen, *tribí* also may be understood as “daring” – in a positive sense. Replacing “insolent” with “daring” radically changes the song's meaning. One may suppose that the enslaved performers understood *tribí* differently than their audience. By performing this song, then, enslaved people could appear submissive and repentant while simultaneously rejoicing over the exploits of Tula, bewailing his death, and raging at the injustice of slavery. The heavy-handed oppression of labor was resisted and is remembered, even when not always apparent.

After emancipation, in 1863, the lives of former slaves did not change significantly, though their geographic mobility improved. Commerce was still the most

important source of income, and it was not labor-intensive (Verton 1990a). Many Afro-Curaçaoans remained on the plantations where they had been enslaved, working in accord with the *paga tera* (literally, pay for land) system. In this system, former slaves could farm plots of plantation land for themselves as long as they worked a certain number of days per year for the plantation owner. In addition, the women, men, and children living by *paga tera* often worked additional days for low wages for the plantation owners – who themselves often were in debt (Allen 1992a; Römer 1991). It is interesting to note that from 1917–21, when the opportunity arose to leave Curaçao for better employment, about 50 per cent of the male labor force sailed to Cuba to work the sugar fields and to build railroads (Allen 1992a). This would appear to indicate that former slaves were unable to improve their working conditions or rewards significantly after emancipation. They struggled daily and many later emigrated to make ends meet. Emancipation in and of itself did not change the Curaçaoan system of social stratification significantly.

As noted earlier, industrialization associated with the oil refinery considerably changed the Curaçaoan workforce and began to produce changes in Curaçaoan social structure. It is not surprising, then, that the mechanization of the oil refinery – producing drastic layoffs (Court 1982) – led eventually to a riot in 1969 that was quelled by the Dutch militia (Anderson and Dynes 1975; Gastmann 1978; Lowenthal 1972). The riot is known as *trenta'i mei* (*trenta di mei*; the 30th of May) and resulted in marked social change.

The riot began three days after some refinery workers went on strike. Most of the striking workers were employed by an outside contractor. There had been about three weeks of negotiations aimed at raising the salaries of contract workers to the level of those employed by Shell, and at raising the salaries of Curaçaoans to those of non-Curaçaoans, who received a bonus for working away from their countries. After the strike had gone on for three days, additional labor unions were convinced to join the effort. Charles Gomes Casseres, a Sephardi present at the time, describes the events (Gomes Casseres 1991:62–63):

In May of 1969, a serious strike broke out at one of the principal sub-contractors of Shell Curaçao NV. Through inept handling of the demands of the unions, the unrest escalated until it reached boiling point on the morning of May 30th. The workers organized a march to the “Fort” in Punda, the seat of the Antillean Government [Fort Amsterdam]. En route, they looted a supermarket and loaded up on rum and whisky. They also burned a few cars along the way and penetrated the Texas Instruments semi-conductor plant [no longer on Curaçao] but did no damage. They marched on to Parera to enter town. When the ill-equipped police tried to stop them at Berg Altena [near a Jewish cemetery], some shots were fired, which killed two labor leaders and seriously wounded a third. The march that by then had deteriorated into an unmanageable mob now broke loose. The demonstrators bypassed the police barricade and swarmed into town. The first wave contented itself with stealing fruit from the Venezuelan schooners while the crews looked on impassively.

They then broke some shop windows and looted the merchandise on display. They could not reach the Fort because its gates were closed and heavily defended by armed police. The second wave to enter town was far more violent. They started fires in some of the shop windows that had previously been smashed and burned more cars. They then crossed the Emma pontoon bridge, which unbelievably was still in place for pedestrians to cross, and they also set fire to some of the commercial establishments in Otrobanda. The strong prevailing wind from the east caused the flames to ignite many adjacent buildings, turning the multitude of fires into a conflagration that laid waste a score of buildings on both sides of town. By the time the Dutch marines came into action at about 1:00 p.m., the damage had already been done. But the marines' presence and the curfew that was soon proclaimed kept the situation from getting worse. Negotiations between labour unions, some civic groups ... and Government were initiated the next day, and early elections were announced.

Anderson and Dynes (1975) report that the crowd was composed of youths in addition to workers. Some of the targets of the rioters, such as Texas Instruments, were chosen deliberately due to past grievances against them (see Abraham 1993). Homes, however, were left unharmed, as were public and quasi-public buildings. The focus of the rioters was on commercial properties. Merchants were warned of the approaching crowd, and many closed, boarded up their shops, and left the area. I am told that the shops of merchants who remained in town were left unharmed. My narrator's interpretation was that personal relations on this small island prevented rioters from being willing to harm the establishment of someone they knew and who would have seen them. The police were ill-prepared and understaffed. The situation worsened when a number of union leaders left the scene to check on a union leader who had been shot and taken to the hospital; thus, the crowd lost much of its leadership and direction during the second confrontation with the police. Rioters broke into small groups. Most were young men; there were few women. The Red Cross, the Rescue Squad, and the volunteer militia (VKC) helped to restore order in their various ways, and faced less opposition from rioters than the police or the Dutch marines. Private citizens came out to help, too. A curfew was established and enforced for the next three days, but I am told that by the next day riot-like activities had stopped.

*Trenta di mei* accelerated social change begun by industrialization, and its effects seem to have been more transformative than either slave revolt. First, it altered party politics. Black and working-class participation in political and governmental affairs grew. The distinction between those who are and are not *yu'i Kòrsou* reflects an insistence on such participation. Afro-Curaçaoans, those who most often adopt the identity of *yu'i Kòrsou*, claimed authority over "their" island.

Second, the voices of the labor unions increasingly were included in political discussions and economic decisions. Funds were formed to finance and support the creation of small businesses (Silvanie 1992). Labor laws were liberalized. Wages,

pensions, and benefits were raised (Gomes Casseres 1984). Minimum wages were set “with practically automatic indexation” (Pourier 1992:118). Due to labor unions, wage costs on Curaçao now tend not to decline when businesses do less well (Dare 1992).

Some people with whom I spoke thought a portion of these changes went too far (see Pourier 1992). They were frustrated, for example, over the restrictions on the leeway to sack employees – the dismissal laws. As I understand the regulations in place at the time of my fieldwork, it was virtually impossible to fire anyone from a private business after they had completed a probationary period. This resulted in large staffs in order to have sufficient workers for peak periods. To counter the large staff size, employees often worked for relatively low pay because employers needed to spread out their labor costs. In addition, often there were more workers than necessary in any particular shop, resulting in numerous employer complaints that employees were lazy and unproductive. One ethnically identified group of business owners were said to fire workers shortly before the completion of the probationary period. Then, it was said, they hired new employees or re-hired employees who had been fired earlier, after the statutory waiting period had passed. This avoided the costs associated with hiring permanent workers.

*Karnaval* celebrations of the type described earlier reflect social change in the wake of the 1969 riot, too. The grand *karnaval* events with the long parades that have drawn thousands of participants began shortly after the riot. They were implemented because the government wanted to support a social event that brought people together to have fun. It was thought that such an event would promote cooperative social interactions among people who otherwise might not spend time together in leisure activities. Thus, a commission to manage *karnaval* was founded in 1971.

Another consequence of the 1969 riot may have been an emerging unwillingness by the government and among the general populace to tolerate high levels of unemployment or impoverishment. Thus, in the early 1980s, as the Curaçaoan economy began to decline, the government purchased large, failing private businesses (Holiday 1992). Even with economic troubles, the 1987 per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Netherlands Antilles compared favorably with most of the Caribbean. At 6,810 USD, it significantly lagged behind the United States (19,860 USD) and several lesser-populated, vacation-oriented islands, but most Caribbean nations had far lower figures. For example, the next highest per-capita GDP in the Caribbean after the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba was that of Puerto Rico, at 5,520 USD. In comparable places, such as Barbados (5,330 USD), Martinique (4,280 USD), and Trinidad and Tobago (4,220 USD), the GDP was still lower (Momsen 1993:12).

Many Curaçaoans work for the government. They work in government-owned businesses, in public works, and as public servants. However, by 1985 the Curaçaoan and the Netherlands Antillean governments came to be regarded as over-staffed and efforts were begun to decrease the number of employees. One method was to encourage resignations through lump-sum severance awards

(Hasham 1992). I met a man who had taken such a settlement. He used the funds to buy a van and then to generate income through the tourist business. He would meet cruise ships and search for customers on the pier, he made arrangements to pick up or drop off travelers at the airport, and he arranged and conducted tours to Venezuela for Curaçaoans. He also converted part of his home to a small tourist apartment; eventually, he purchased a second van, enlisting an adult son to drive the original van from time to time.

In 1988, the Netherlands Antillean government changed hands over the issue of attempting to trim the budget through civil servant layoffs. The new government instituted a “solidarity tax” on the remaining government employees in order to finance salaries (Economist Intelligence Unit 1988). By the time of my fieldwork, this solution had lost its acceptability. A coalition of labor unions (the *sindikát*) opposed a series of excise taxes scheduled for the fall of 1991. At the time, I was in regular contact with a group of working people employed on an archaeological dig. They came to work despite the unions’ call for a general strike. One man explained his presence by saying that he was still shaken by the 1969 riot, twenty-two years earlier. He was doing what he could to prevent similar chaos.

In spring 1992, government employees – including police and sanitation workers – went on strike. They thought that the time had come to eliminate the solidarity tax and to restore their full salaries. Fort Amsterdam, which includes the Governor’s residence, was shut and guarded by the VKC, the local militia. This force was sufficient to protect the seat of government, but could not have been mobilized to suppress public dissent violently. A government truck and several other vehicles were parked to block a central intersection in *Punda*. Acquaintances explained to me that removing them would have provoked the strikers, possibly leading to violence. A widely accepted lesson of 1969 is that allowing workers to express their discontent through symbolic actions, such as closing a square to traffic, is a necessary way to release tensions – an empowerment of workers that did not seriously threaten the nation-state.

It so happened that a large Sephardi wedding ceremony had been planned to take place at the *Snoa*, one block from that blockade in *Punda* during this strike. Security guards, as well as workers to clean the streets around the synagogue, were hired. The wedding proceeded as planned, without incident. The government workers who struck in 1992 were better organized than the refinery workers of 1969, and apparently not as angry with the Curaçaoan social system. Indeed, the labor unions of 1992 were more pervasive socially and more effective politically than the unions of 1969. Eventually, the unions and the government took each other to court – an institution staffed by judges from the Netherlands. The court’s decision largely favored the unions. It declared the government obligated to raise workers’ salaries. Serious violence was averted. The authority of social institutions was maintained. The then current political leadership was weakened; and new taxes were proposed to cover the additional costs.

Curaçaoan workers – predominantly but not entirely Afro-Curaçaoan – have acquired more power, particularly in the political arena. One consequence has

been an increase in the number of government jobs and a rise in salaries. In addition, there has been a shift in the effect of race; it no longer as closely indexes those with a variety of resources, status, and power from those without. Middle-class Afro-Curaçaoans, for example, have acquired increasing political and economic prominence. Race has not prevented such gains.

The legacy of slavery, colonialism, and industrialization has produced a labor force demanding social justice, particularly since *trenta'i mei*, which galvanized Curaçaoan labor and shocked the Curaçaoan elite. After 1969, labor movement activity led to changes in the structure of the Curaçaoan social landscape. As reflected in the increased attention paid to the distribution of wealth and in the political leverage of the working class, negotiations and understandings about social *place*, about social divisions, social allegiances, and relative social power have become realigned. Class now figures in the “computation,” in addition to race, gender, and religion. Laborers and the laboring class no longer are nearly entirely dependent on elites.

## The politics of language

Language is another arena in which social boundaries and social connections are marked and reflected. This can be found in the intersection of island identity and language and illustrated by relations among the Papiamentu-speaking ABC Islands. Aruba both cooperates and competes with Curaçao and Bonaire, and these relations are reflected in the politics of language. Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao formed a commission to standardize Papiamentu spelling, *Komishon Standarisashon di Papiamentu* (KSP), that is illustrative. Ironically, the Netherlands Antillean order creating the KSP was written in Dutch (*Komishon Standarisashon di Papiamentu* 1985). The commission, formed in 1984, ratified its first list of standardized words that same year. There is a basic tension between Aruban and Curaçaoan KSP members. The Aruban representatives struggle for etymologically standardized spelling – that is, spelling consistent with the roots of the particular word. Curaçaoan and Bonairean representatives support phonological spelling – that is, spelling words as they sound (Broek 1999). Thus, for example, the Papiamentu word for “to take (grasp)” is spelled *kohe* in the phonological spelling, but *coge* – from the Spanish, *coger* – in the etymological spelling. The second standardized list, published in 1988, listed *kohe* as the standard spelling. Beginning with its second list, the KSP standardized island regionalisms (*variantenan regional*) – marking an “A,” “B,” or “C” next to the appropriate words (*Komishon Standarisashon di Papiamentu* 1988).

However, the etymological–phonological dispute between Curaçaoans and Arubans was not about the merits of one or the other system. It primarily was a dispute about status and descent-based prestige. Arubans apparently take pride – I did no research in Aruba – in an ancestry that reputedly is derived more from Native Americans and less from Africans. Thus, more Arubans claim free ancestors, while the ancestors of more Curaçaoans may have been enslaved. Arubans are



known to claim that Papiamentu originates in the combination of a Native American language – “Caiquetio” – and Spanish (Mansur 1991) despite convincing evidence for a West African–Portuguese core (Martinus 1990) in the version spoken on each of the ABC Islands. Papiamentu (Goilo 1972; Gould 1995; Ratzlaff 1992) is a West African–Portuguese creole, greatly influenced by Dutch and Spanish (Andersen 1974), with lesser influences from other languages, including English and Hebrew (Henriquez 1988, 1991).

The non-standard character of written Papiamentu is illustrated by the experience of a Jewish Curaçaoan who complained that it was harder for her to read Papiamentu-language newspapers than any other written material. Each newspaper tends to have its own distinctive spelling style; furthermore, journalists' spellings are individualized, and may or may not coincide with the general style of the paper in which they are published. This woman said that to understand a Papiamentu newspaper she needed to speak the words out loud; this was the only way she could make sense of the differing spellings she encountered. *Kohe*, for example, might be spelled *kwe*, as it is pronounced, or, *kue*. In the advertisement at the beginning of this chapter, for example, Plaate spelled *yu di Kòrsou* (contracted, *yu'i Kòrsou*) as *Joe'i Kòrsou*. This spelling is not as strange as it may appear to an English-speaker. The letter “j” in Dutch is pronounced like the English letter “Y,” and “oe” in Dutch sounds like “oo” in English. Plaate's spelling is phonological, but derived from Dutch. Plaate uses other interesting idiosyncrasies. For example, although his advertisement is written primarily in Papiamentu, for “unknown” he uses the Dutch word *onbekent* (spelled *onbekend* in Dutch, but pronounced as spelled by Plaate) rather than the Papiamentu *deskonosí*. Both are used widely, so his choice does not derive from either word's relative frequency of use. Plaate's text also illustrates that even names may be spelled in differing ways. In a note to me, “Layo” Capriles spelled his name “Lio.” A non-Jewish Curaçaoan complained that the switch to phonological spelling makes it more difficult for Curaçaoan children to learn other languages, thus distancing Curaçaoans from the larger world and from their linguistic heritage. As a student of Papiamentu as a second language, I felt that phonological spelling simplified my task. I could look up words in a dictionary easily, not worry how to pronounce a word I read, and not worry how to spell a word I heard.

I am told that there are differences between Curaçaoan and Aruban Papiamentu, but that the two dialects are mutually intelligible. Curaçaoans can recognize that a Papiamentu-speaker is from Aruba, and vice versa. The invention of a Native American–Spanish root for Papiamentu may serve to enable Arubans to claim a free, independent, and untamed history. The West African–Portuguese historical narrative reinforces the representation of Curaçaoans as wronged inheritors of a rich heritage that should be reclaimed, that is, as the descendants of enslaved Africans. Recent struggles between Curaçao and Aruba over politico-economic arrangements are reflected in an ongoing cultural struggle over historical legacies that are situated, in part, in a struggle over standardized spelling.

Language has become the “site” of an additional cultural struggle. As in Corsica



– another space “on the margins” of Europe, where people struggle between French and Corsican linguistic practice (Jaffe 1993) – Curaçaoans disagree about the place of Papiamentu and Dutch. The 1992 census found that 89 per cent of Curaçaoan households communicate with each other in Papiamentu, 13 per cent in Dutch, 7 per cent in English, and 7 per cent in Spanish. Other languages are found in 3 per cent of households. The numbers total more than 100 per cent due to the 16 per cent of households in which more than one language is spoken regularly (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 1993). Dutch, for the most part, is the language of Netherlands Antillean government. Papiamentu is a language spoken only in three places in the world: Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba.

Papiamentu is a signifier of Curaçaoan patrimony, yet in 1974 the Curaçao public library held 35,257 novels in Dutch and 203 in Papiamentu (Domingos 1974:38). Though most communications were in Papiamentu, the final entertainer at the 1991 Miss Curaçao Pageant introduced each of his songs in Dutch, and then sang each song in English, including a song about loving his homeland in Curaçao. In opposition to such practices, some local leaders propose increasing the use of Papiamentu in public spaces. They argue that speaking a more widely shared language will contribute to a sense of common purpose and of nationhood. It is argued that the resulting enhanced sense of Curaçaoan identity would promote social responsibility and aid in maintaining social order. Instantiations of this approach include the KSP; the single private elementary school in which the language of instruction is Papiamentu; the increasing number of schools in which Papiamentu is the language of instruction for the first four grades; the introduction in 1986 of Papiamentu as a subject of study in primary schools (Vedder 1987); and a growing Papiamentu-language literature, including poetry and novels. Some argue that increased use of Papiamentu in schools will both improve mental development and lessen the experience of personal diminishment felt by many Curaçaoans who do not speak Dutch at home (Prins-Winkel 1983). The claim is that once students are allowed to study in their first language, their cognitive achievements and their self-esteem will improve. Hall (1995) is an advocate of such a “cultural revolution.” He writes (1995:12–13):

To encounter people who can speak with one another in ... patois [or in] ... creole, ... that these have become as it were the languages in which important things can be said, in which important aspirations and hopes can be formulated, in which an important grasp of the histories that have made these places can be written down, in which artists are willing for the first time, the first generation, to practise and so on, that is what I call a cultural revolution.

Those on the opposite side argue that since so few people speak Papiamentu on the globe, Curaçaoans must be educated in a more widely spoken language to participate in wider, sophisticated discourses of science and the arts. Due to colonial history, this must be Dutch – even though Dutch itself is spoken by relatively few people. Still, Dutch literature includes a wide range of contemporary

knowledge – subjects about which there is nothing published in Papiamentu. Not being anthropologists, proponents of this latter position argue that Papiamentu is not a “real” language. Its lack of standardized spelling, the relatively simple morphology, even the contractions found in everyday speech often are interpreted in informal conversation as evidence that Papiamentu is not a complete language.

The roots of this latter position lie in hegemonic practices of the Netherlands. Dutch-speaking, Dutch-looking – i.e., tall, light-haired, light-skinned – residents of Curaçao were in positions of power throughout Curaçaoan colonial history. The source of this power was the Dutch metropole. The ideology that anything Dutch is better than anything Curaçaoan was purveyed. One application of this attitude continues to amaze me. Teachers beat students who spoke Papiamentu with one another rather than Dutch – even when the students spoke Papiamentu while on the playground, even during recess. This practice continued after Curaçaoan political autonomy. One person after another told of experiencing it. Often this meant that from their first year in school, students – who may have spoken virtually no Dutch at home – were taught in Dutch in the classroom (Prins-Winkel 1983). The significantly different morphologies and phonemics of Papiamentu and Dutch make learning Dutch difficult for schoolchildren who also are attempting to understand educational material in a new language. In addition, students must acquire a new orthography in order to write and read the differing Dutch phonemics (Salazar 1983). As a result, fewer than 25 per cent of elementary school students reach the sixth grade without repeating a grade at least once (Marks 1976), and Curaçaoan students attain command of Dutch less well than peers in the Netherlands (Vedder 1987). Such is ideological hegemony and colonial discipline, and it is not limited to the Dutch Leeward Islands. Residents of the Windward Netherlands Antilles are at a distinct disadvantage in the arena of language; they grow up speaking English while living in a nation in which official business is conducted in Dutch. A prosaic example of this is that although most of the people on Saba speak no Dutch, the road signs there are in Dutch.

Both within Papiamentu and between Papiamentu and Dutch, language is a significant marker of identity. Struggles over it and feelings about it are intense. Linguistic choices and usage certainly qualify as indicators of social identity. Curaçaoan-ness, native-ness, and metropolitan-ness are some of the identities marked by language in Curaçao.

There is awareness in Curaçao of the constructed character of the Netherlands Antilles nation-state. Autonomy has come relatively recently. The Kingdom of the Netherlands has gone from a tri-partite formation including the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, and Suriname, to a bi-partite form including the Netherlands and the Netherlands Antilles, and to a new tri-partite constellation including the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba. Discussions about Netherlands Antillean constitutional structure continue, as evidenced in the recent referenda. Moreover, individuals “tinker” with political affiliation through immigration, emigration, and citizenship decisions.

Economic aspects of Curaçaoan life are understood to be intertwined with political organization. Government intervention in economic affairs is ongoing (see Hasham and Dare 1992), including state operation of an airline, purchase of failing industries, tariffs, duties, and tax laws, “development” spending, and – especially since the riot – labor laws. Political economic policy, especially since 1969, has been informed by social conditions. In addition to direct social programs, government policies attempt to maintain social order through employment, including adding workers directly to the government payroll.

Competing attempts are made to enhance both Netherlands Antillean and Curaçaoan “culture” – in this sense meaning something like its cohesive social identity. AAINA employees research Netherlands Antillean history and culture. The Curaçaoan Bureau of Culture (*sekshon di kultura*) promotes celebrations of local customs. There are a national (Netherlands Antillean) flag and anthem, a Curaçaoan flag and anthem, and a holiday to celebrate the Curaçaoan flag (*día di bandera*). Earlier I discussed the nation-building aspect of *karnaval*. Among other holidays is a day celebrating the Dutch Queen’s birthday, which serves to remind Antilleans of their membership in The Kingdom. In addition, attempts to construct Curaçaoan identity occur in the arena of language.

In this chapter I have attempted a “vertical integration” of several orders of material. This has been an all-too-brief representation of social life that integrates levels often analyzed separately. I have attempted to draw attention to the relationships connecting global with regional processes, connecting ethnic “sites” and individual choice. Politics and economics have been described together with social structure and anecdotes, and all of these have been placed in historical context. These differing orders of material usually are not discussed together. There is no standard way to conjoin them. Indeed, the language of each level of analysis lacks the terms with which to discuss analyses other than its own. An alternative approach might have been to discuss each level separately. I have tried instead to represent these analyses by linking them through juxtaposition. However, I have imposed other categories to divide this work that organize it by chapter. My aim – in contradistinction to analytical segmentation – is to represent the same social body repeatedly, through differing perspectives. This chapter is the second in a series of “views” of Jewish ethnicity in Curaçao. Subsequent chapters will present further views. The next chapter is a closer-grained view of Jewish historical political economy, less encumbered than this chapter by broad social context.

# The Sephardi Jewish presence on Curaçao

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This chapter conceptually is divided into two. First, it describes Sephardi<sup>1</sup> history prior to, then since, their arrival on Curaçao. Together, these eras produced the foundations upon which the identity of Curaçaoan Sephardi as a social category in the local ethnotheory of social space is constructed. The first part of this chapter includes the following topical sections: expulsion, forced conversion, and inquisition; out of Iberia; the “new Jerusalem” in Amsterdam; and coming to the Americas. In these sections I discuss the conditions that brought Sephardi Jews to Curaçao, and the dispositions that they brought with them. These dispositions include cultural characteristics, memories of historical circumstances, and social relations.

Oppression drove the ancestors of Curaçaoan Sephardi from Iberia and forced many to leave their religion or to hide their continued allegiance to Judaism. Religious knowledge and practice were transformed. Jewish bodies were burned. Yet, prior to the institution of severe oppression, Iberian Jews had produced a variety of significant intellectual and economic achievements. In addition, Iberian Sephardi felt connected to each other; they had a sense of “relatedness” with Sephardi who were not kin. This social and religious cohesion, along with international networks of finance and trade that sustained many Sephardi, were preserved through the efforts of elite Sephardi who had participated in pre-oppression achievements.

In the latter part of this chapter I present historical and contemporary Sephardi social organization on Curaçao. This includes the following topical sections: the *Yom Kippur* service; Sephardi settlement on Curaçao; economic activity; religious organization; religio-political organization; and kinship. These sections illustrate the ways in which pre-Curaçao Sephardi dispositions have been both maintained and altered on Curaçao.

### **Pre-Curaçaoan Sephardi**

Living on Curaçao are people who descend from Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal prior to the Edicts of Expulsion of 1492 and 1497, respectively. Their ancestors mostly arrived in Curaçao in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. Much of their current economic,

religious, and everyday life centers around kin clusters. Most of the people in these kin-related clusters now are joined by other Jews to constitute United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (Hope of Israel). Also living on Curaçao are Jews from a variety of places in Eastern Europe – Rumania, Hungary, Poland, the Ukraine – who arrived largely in the 1920s and 1930s, after immigration quotas were instituted in the United States. This group of Ashkenazi Jews formed Congregation Shaare Tsedek (Gates of Righteousness).

## Expulsion, forced conversion, and Inquisition

The European discovery of Curaçao by the Spanish occurred in 1499, seven years after the Spanish Expulsion Edict. The Edict, issued March 31, 1492, ordered all non-Christians to convert to Catholicism or to leave the country by July 31 of that year. The deadline later was extended by three days to August 2, 1492 – the anniversary, by the Jewish calendar, of the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. Columbus sailed for the New World on the next day, August 3, 1492. Jewish popular imagination, on the assumption that Columbus may have been a Jew, long has speculated on possible connections between Columbus' voyage and the Expulsion from Spain (Elkin 1992).

Discrimination against Jews had been growing in Iberia for several centuries. Those Jews who converted and remained in Spain after the Inquisition but continued to practice Judaism in secret were called *marranos* (hogs), and, if caught, were sometimes killed. Sephardi Jews today prefer *conversos* (converts), crypto-Jews, or secret Jews over the pejorative term *marranos*.

Contrary to much popular opinion, there had been Inquisitions in the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Expulsion Edict of 1492. In addition, although tens of thousands were burned during *autos-da-fé* associated with Inquisitions after the Expulsion Edict,<sup>2</sup> Inquisitions were not held routinely, nor distributed evenly from place to place. Moreover, a few prominent people continued to live openly as Jews and many others were known to have been Jews by their neighbors, even if their Judaism was not admitted openly (Cohen 1993). For example, in the small town of Belmonte, Portugal, with 2,500 current residents, only recently has a section of town come to be known – to those of us outside of Belmonte – to include 120 Jews. Nevertheless, Belmonte folk knowledge long has characterized that section of town as Jewish (Brenner 1991; Brenner and Neumann 1990). For almost 500 years the Belmonte Jews had been relatively endogamous, had lived in a geographic cluster, and went to a Catholic church only when necessary to keep people from talking – e.g., for their baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Their ritual practices – now revealed to outsiders – have recognizably Jewish components, but bear only limited similarity to contemporary Judaic religious ritual. The Inquisition altered their form of worship and produced a stigmatized, discriminated-against, secretive, inward-looking group. The chilling effects of the Inquisition must have been widespread, even though the Inquisition was selective in its targets.

The Spanish and Portuguese Expulsions and Inquisitions were situated in the

midst of centuries of debate among Western European Christians over whether to allow Jews to live in their midst. Expulsions of Jews from Western Europe began over 200 years before the Spanish expulsion, when England expelled Jews in 1290. By 1500, Jews had been expelled from all of Western Europe except for a few parts of Italy (Yerushalmi 1982). The French Revolution was a key reversal in Western European understanding, introducing a new era for Jews in Western Europe. An ideology of individualism that called for individual rather than corporate rights of citizenship, could significantly alter the status of Jews because it could enfranchise people of the Jewish religion. The “early modern” era of Jewish history in Europe can be considered to extend – with geographic variation – from the first English expulsion to the French Revolution. As it became more possible to integrate with the non-Jewish majority of one’s fellow citizens – an activity eventually repudiated by Zionism and denied during the Holocaust – one may speak of the “modern” Jewish period.

Sympathetic narratives of early modern Jewish history, such as this, describe a trajectory of increasing opportunities for Jews and increasing tolerance of them by European nations after a period of capricious vilification. These kinds of histories conform to a cognitive template that anticipates a return to a “golden age” like the one depicted in Spain, after centuries of struggle under oppressive rule. Furthermore, these narratives recall a trope in Judaic cosmology – in the story of the exodus from slavery in Egypt to nationhood and freedom in Israel, in the concept of “Jerusalem” as a spiritual rather than a geographic place, and in the concept of a messiah who will transform life on earth. Jewish identity thus often becomes constructed to include a chronic struggle for civil rights that has partial and intermittent successes. This template is characteristic of narratives of Jews in the western world, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi. The trope of earthly redemption, with or without Divine intervention, is a recurrent theme in early modern Jewish histories. Moreover, this model of early modern Jewish history specifically depicts the Dutch, English, and later French New World as a place with equality, and thus of opportunity for Jews, a place to arrive at earthly redemption. Even the Spanish and Portuguese New World was less oppressive for Jews than Iberia. Although imperfect, for Jews the New World is imagined as a haven.

In most instances the first Jews in the western hemisphere were Sephardi. They arrived before most Ashkenazi; their civil liberties were relatively well respected (see, for example, Hurwitz and Hurwitz 1965; Oppenheim 1907; Yerushalmi 1982), and a significant number prospered. Their relatively successful social circumstances and their practices were replicated to some degree in the circumstances of later, often Ashkenazi, settlers. Indeed, the Jewish presence on Curaçao can be characterized as corresponding both to the template of early modern Jewish history described above and to the New World trend in which early Sephardi settlement shaped later Ashkenazi settlement.

Cohen (1993) interprets the Spanish Inquisition as a tool used in political struggles between two, later three, abstracted components of Iberian social structure: the Old Guard, the New Guard, and the Modern Old Guard. With the passing of

generations the boundaries of these social components and their determining issues could shift. Political alignments, rhetoric, and economic conditions could change, and individual, kin- or interest-group members of a "Guard" were being modified continually, yet the social structural positions remained. Cohen (1993:23–24) states the simplified basis of his typology:

The Reconquista [the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims which may be said to have begun in 722 and to have reached its completion in 1492] generated a social order based on military achievement. It comprised two strata: warrior-leaders, developing into an aristocracy, and their raggedy followers. With the advance of the Reconquista the warrior-aristocracy diverged toward two extremes: the older and more comfortable, and the newer and more ambitious. To the constellations of warrior-leaders around these extremes the terms "Old Guard" and "New Guard" may be respectively applied.

The Old Guard would consist of those who wished to maintain the power of the current elite, who wished to maintain the *status quo*. The New Guard consisted of those who had gained power recently through changing socioeconomic conditions, and their supporters. For centuries New Guards could achieve prestige and power by pushing the *Reconquista* further south; but as Moslem-ruled territories diminished, pursuing centralization of a polity became a more feasible alternative. New Guards sometimes took advantage of new knowledge and techniques to acquire financial or political power, for example by introducing rational systems of management that heightened efficiency, but they lacked and sought the institutionalized status and power of the Old Guard. The Modern Old Guard would consist of members of the Old Guard by ascription who adopted New Guard practices.

Cohen (1993:49) presents a picture of Iberia and the Spanish and Portuguese New World in which Inquisitions periodically intensify and become more lethal in conjunction with social struggles having little or nothing to do with the inscription of Roman Catholic cosmology on the social body:

In reality, through the Inquisition, fear was sown throughout the New Guard, from its courtiers to its writers, from its scientists to its artisans, among everyone indeed whose position of wealth, creativity, or political preference was at any given moment perceived as a threat to the power of the Old Guard establishment. This fear was enhanced by the realization that the Inquisition could at any time choose to strike or not to strike based largely on its own internal agenda, a factor that best explains the apparent waves of recurrent judaizing in various parts of the Iberian world. At the same time the unclean blood [that is, the descendants of those who converted to Christianity after 1391] of Old Guard aristocrats was conveniently overlooked, except if aberrantly they proved to be religiously maverick or politically incorrect.

Also on the basis of political incorrectness the Inquisition at different times



pursued New Guard individuals who could not be identified as judaizers [i.e., practitioners of Judaism], but were Erasmians, Protestants, mystics, Jansenists, Freemasons, devotees of the Enlightenment, and others at odds with official Catholic thinking.

Thus, a New Guard of varying types, including Jews and putative Jews, was dominated, cowed, and coerced by a racist policy of “blood purity” that aided in the formation of Spain and Portugal as – what might be considered totalitarian – states, under the leadership of a Modern Old Guard for the benefit of an Old Guard.<sup>3</sup> The Spanish, in particular, brought to the New World a brutal approach to the management of political dissent and conflict.

Referring to the Sephardi Jews, and to the Portuguese Sephardi Jews in particular, Birmingham (1971:7) quotes from *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, “many sufferings, which they had endured for the sake of their faith, had made them more than usually self-conscious; they considered themselves a superior class – the nobility of Jewry.” The Jews of the Iberian Peninsula – that is, the Sephardi – particularly under the Moors, had been prominent intellectuals, businessmen, physicians, court advisors, and even *Dons* (Birmingham 1971:30–50). In comparison to Ashkenazi Jews, who lived mostly in northern, eastern, and central Europe, Sephardi Jews tended to practice a spirituality more in conformance to the surrounding religious tradition (see Zenner and Deshen 1982:9–12 for a discussion of the parallel differences between Middle Eastern Jews [Sephardi] living in Moslem societies and European Jews [Ashkenazi] living in Christian societies; and see Dimont 1978; Raphael 1985; and Sharot 1976 for further comparison between Ashkenazi<sup>4</sup> and Sephardi<sup>5</sup> Jews). As Cohen (1993:61) describes it, “whether as politically autonomous Jews or politically integrated Christians, they had regularly interacted with the majority community in social and intellectual openness.” Cohen was writing about Sephardi living on the Iberian peninsula, but he could have been describing contemporary Sephardi in Curaçao.

The Sephardi tendency toward social integration with the non-Jewish majorities of Iberia may be reflected in an intellectual tradition that tended to follow classical logic, to strive for an harmonious rationality (Elazar 1989a) and for intellectual syntheses (Cohen 1993). Sephardi thought tended to value aesthetics and form over inspiration and experience. Sephardi criticism tended to be restricted by an ethic of respect; it tended toward a more aristocratic approach to science and philosophy (Elazar 1989a:30–39).

In 1497, under Spanish pressure, King Manoel I of Portugal forcibly converted to Roman Catholicism – rather than expelling – the Portuguese Jews, including as many as 120,000 Jews who had fled from Spain in 1492 (Swetschinski 1982). The Portuguese Inquisition, however, was established only in 1536, and with exceptions was somewhat less strictly enforced than Spain’s. Some Jews remained in Portugal and in Portuguese territories in the western hemisphere, took Portuguese names, and spoke Portuguese. These Portuguese Jews, one segment of the Sephardi Jews, were the ancestors of the Jews of Curaçao.



Portuguese Sephardi are a significant segment of what have been termed “Western Sephardi,” as distinguished from “Eastern Sephardi.” The latter tended to settle to the east of Iberia, around the Mediterranean Sea, chiefly in the Ottoman Empire, though at varying times significant numbers settled in Morocco, Algeria, Greece, and Italy. Eastern Sephardi were less likely to have converted to Christianity than Western Sephardi who, by virtue of their conversions, had greater opportunity to settle in Europe or in Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World (Cohen 1993). The tendency to convert, to change one’s name, and to mask one’s religious identity meant that Western Sephardi in many times and places were not linked by religious practice (Kaplan 1982), and that the presence or absence of Jewish descent was not likely to be clear. Instead, Western Sephardi were linked “by their New Guard status, with its characteristic range of skills, including their broad general culture and linguistic versatility, and its [their cultural] conditioning toward risk orientation, marginality, and alienation” (Cohen 1993:69). From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries Sephardi were linked by a sense of family that was both metaphoric and actual. Yerushalmi (1982:177) writes:

Acutely conscious of sharing a common origin, historic fate, and collective identity, geographical distance alone could not loosen the close and intricate web of relationships that bound them together. Quite often these were real ties of blood and kinship. Within a given family some members might be living openly as Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, Italy and North Africa, while others were still “New Christians,” whether believing Catholics or crypto-Jews, in the Iberian Peninsula, in the New World, or in Portuguese India.

Since this period of diaspora from Iberia, both Western and Eastern Sephardi have called themselves members of “the Nation” (the Spanish–Portuguese, Sephardi Jewish Nation) (Kaplan 1982:194).

## **Out of Iberia**

The New Guard-type tendency for rationalization and modernization among Sephardi, along with the real and imagined ties of kinship that could facilitate international commerce so successfully, is why the similar thinking, competitive elites – the New Guards and Modern Old Guards – of certain European states allowed Sephardi to immigrate to their lands. It is clear that residents with New Guard qualities were desirable due to the fact that “in many cases it is impossible to determine whether the Jewish identity of Western Sephardim was accepted prior to their emigration or subsequently” (Cohen 1993:74). Places such as England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Russia were not interested in having Jews live within their borders, though the open practice of Judaism often was tolerated. Rather, they wanted the skills that Western Sephardi could bring in diplomacy, commerce, political administration, and scientific activities, such as

medicine. Such skills became mythologized as fact in discourse of the times (Yerushalmi 1982), regardless of the existence of impoverished Sephardi (Cohen 1993), and possibly because of the widespread internal regulations of Sephardi communities that tended to place their economic elites in positions of community authority (Kaplan 1982).

## The “New Jerusalem” in Amsterdam

Having taken various routes, some of these Jews arrived in the Netherlands late in the sixteenth century and particularly during the first half of the seventeenth century (Bodian 1994, 1997; Elazar 1989b; Israel 1978). Amsterdam’s first Jewish congregation, *Beth Ya’acob* (House of Jacob) was established in 1597 (Yerushalmi 1982). Beginning in 1603 one could practice Judaism openly; in 1657, Jews were granted the status of subject in the states of Holland, Zeeland, and West Friesland (Cohen 1993). “Subject,” *ingezetene*, however, should not be conflated with “citizen” or “freeman,” *burger* or *poorter*. Jews were subjects, not citizens.

Sephardi were drawn to – and in many respects, though not entirely, welcomed by – the Dutch republic, created in 1581 out of the largely Protestant Northern Provinces of the Low Countries that had rebelled against and seceded from Spain, partly because of Dutch hostility toward Spain and Catholicism. The day after the above announcements of 1657 the Dutch governing council announced that all its Jewish residents were subjects, probably to enable Dutch Jews to trade with Spain. Spain had allowed Dutch traders since 1648, but had refused to cooperate with Dutch Jewish traders. The 1657 pronouncements declared that Dutch Jews were under Dutch protection when traveling abroad (Yerushalmi 1982).

Spain had begun to see the Dutch Sephardi as “an instrument of economic and political subversion” (Israel 1978:2) of the Netherlands during the first half of the seventeenth century, and the resulting Spanish policies produced two periods of Sephardi migration to the “United Provinces” (the Netherlands), primarily to Amsterdam and secondarily to Rotterdam. The first period was after the first Dutch–Spanish war, during the Twelve Years Truce from 1609 to 1621. During that time, Dutch Sephardi regularly traded with *conversos* on the Iberian Peninsula. Dutch superiority in shipping, and their efficiency, resulting in lower prices, contributed to a nearly complete Spanish dependence on the Dutch to conduct their trade with northern Europe. Dutch Sephardi participation in this activity was considerable, and included avoiding Spanish taxes by smuggling and shipping counterfeit coins to Spain. One Spanish source of the time claimed that there were approximately 600 Sephardi families in the Netherlands, but most of this trade was carried out by about one dozen Dutch Sephardi families (Israel 1978). Still, not all Dutch Sephardi were so community-minded. A handful at least either passed on or attempted to pass on information about the smuggling activities of fellow Sephardi to the Spanish. Some probably were motivated by financial gain, others by spite toward rivals, and some appear to have been motivated by an ache for the land they unwillingly left behind (Israel 1978).

Dutch Sephardi commercial interests were constricted severely during the second Dutch–Spanish war, for Spain had been their primary trading partner. Only when Portugal seceded from the federation with Spain in 1640, becoming a trading partner with the United Provinces, did Dutch Sephardi economic interests improve. Then, beginning in 1646, as the war with Spain was winding down (a peace treaty was signed in 1648), trade between Spain and the Netherlands began to flourish. However, at around the same time, Spain both experienced a financial crash and installed a new Chief Inquisitor who increased the persecution of *conversos*. Thus, from 1645 to 1660 the Netherlands experienced a commercial boom despite increasingly effective English competition, due to an influx of significant financial and human capital as *conversos* fled from Spain (Israel 1978). The proportion of Sephardi depositors at the Amsterdam Wisselbank, “Europe’s foremost financial institution” (Israel 1978:24), went from a low of 7 per cent of the total in 1646 to 12.5 per cent in 1661, rising from 126 to 243 accounts (Israel 1978:29). Israel concludes (1978:1) that “in material terms, the making of Dutch Sephardi Jewry was, by the 1660s, largely complete.”

Amsterdam became a center for a revitalized practice of Sephardi Judaism and a nexus of kinship groupings, international commerce, financial and political support of outlying Sephardi communities, and religious teaching, training, publishing, and ritual specialists for the allied Sephardi Jewish communities of England, Germany, France, and the New World, including Curaçao. The centrality of Amsterdam among Western Sephardi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is reflected in features in synagogue buildings, including the *Snoa*, built elsewhere by Western Sephardi that replicate features from the *Esnoga*, the Amsterdam synagogue building (Krinsky 1985; Wigoder 1986).

## Coming to the Americas

It should be no surprise, then, that the first openly Jewish organized community in the New World was in an area ruled by the Netherlands. The Dutch took part of northeastern Brazil, including Recife and Pernambuco, from the Portuguese in 1630. *Conversos* living there and immigrants from the Netherlands formed Congregation *Tzur Israel* in 1637 (Yerushalmi 1982). Most fled when the region was reconquered by the Portuguese in 1654. In the 1650s Dutch Jewish colonists were granted liberal rights in Guiana, Cayenne, and Curaçao – though, of these only Curaçao lasted, with the English and the French taking over Guiana and Cayenne, respectively (Yerushalmi 1982).

A well-known religious scholar and spokesperson of the Amsterdam Jewish community (who had helped convince the English government to allow Sephardi to settle in England), Haham (Rabbi) Menasseh ben Israel argued that Jewish settlement in the Americas realized biblical prophecy and would initiate the Messianic Era (De Bethencourt 1925). Ben Israel applied the biblical passage from the book of Daniel – “and when the scattering of the holy people shall have an end, all those things shall be fulfilled” (Dan. 12:7) – to the establishment of synagogues in

the Americas (Kaplan 1982:195). Sephardi congregations in the Americas would end the scattering of this “holy people.” Ben Israel expressed these understandings in a book, *Esperanza de Israel* (Hope of Israel), the title of which was drawn from Jeremiah (14:8). The Sephardi congregation in Curaçao named itself *Mikvé Israel*, Hebrew for Hope of Israel (Kaplan 1982). One must conclude that among the motivations of the early Sephardi settlers in the New World and in Curaçao was a messianic purpose.

An allied religious aspect to the migration of Sephardi out of Iberia is that *conversos* arrived with little Judaic religious knowledge and with a lack of experience in community-organized sacred ritual. In response, Sephardi communities emphasized religious education. Correspondingly, virtually all Western Sephardi congregations included in their by-laws a provision requiring that members live openly as Jews for a set period of time before being eligible for congregational leadership positions. The Amsterdam congregation required three years; the Dutch Brazilian congregation, *Tzur Israel*, required one year. However, Congregation Mikvé Israel in Curaçao, possibly because of the extensive comings and goings in its early years, was unusual in this regard: it had no such requirement (Kaplan 1982). However, since its merger with Temple Emanu-El in 1964 (see below, p. 107), a person must be a member of the congregation for three years before he can serve on the congregation’s Board of Directors.

Some Sephardi moved directly to the Caribbean from the areas of Brazil reconquered by the Portuguese in 1654. However, contrary to many narratives about Caribbean Jewish settlement (e.g., Davis 1909; Maslin 1982; Merrill 1964), this flight from Brazil does not explain the pattern and the growth of Sephardi settlement in the Caribbean (Swetschinski 1982). The more likely factors were a continuation of Sephardi commercial and kin-based activities in the context of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions and of international relations. Inquisitions and international relations affected the financial and trading networks established by *conversos* between the Iberian Peninsula and regions under Spanish or Portuguese colonial hegemony. As the work of these networks and of others who supplied goods essential to Peninsula residents became untenable, prominent Sephardi financiers re-established and developed new but similarly functioning trade networks in cooperation with Western Sephardi settlers living in areas with access to trading possibilities (Swetschinski 1982). This occurred for a number of reasons. In Portugal, in the New World, and then in Spain, Inquisitions intensified, leading to increased flight. Second, as a result of the Spanish financial crisis, the Spanish Crown failed to pay many of its debts, driving wealthy Sephardi financiers elsewhere in search of new opportunities of the type with which they were familiar. There were also international realignments, including the secession of Portugal from its 1580 to 1640 federation with Spain. This inserted a wedge between Iberian Sephardi and thus weakened trade opportunities with the Iberian Peninsula. In addition (though it also created hardships), intensified English competition with the Dutch due to the 1651 Navigation Act that prohibited non-English traders in

the English colonies created opportunities for Dutch Sephardi traders at the “margins” of English colonies.

From this introduction to Sephardi pre-Curaçao history, one can see that the Western Sephardi brought a number of characteristics, historical memories, and social practices with them to Curaçao that would color their presence there. There was relief after the flight from oppression in Iberia and from the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas. Yet, Sephardi still longed for Iberia, a land they loved but had to flee. Among some Sephardi a messianic hope was directed toward their settlement in the New World. There were Sephardi who were ignorant of Judaism and others who were diligent in their practice of Judaism. There was a sense of kinship toward other members of, and an extensive network of trade and financial contacts among, “the Nation.” The Sephardi social system usually included an economic elite that had critical authority in religious activities, including activities that now might be understood as either personal or secular, that represented the community to outsiders, and that orchestrated subsistence and residential activities of many Sephardi who were not members of that economic elite. In addition, this economic elite played a significant role in international diplomacy and finance. Western Sephardi also had a tradition of secret resistance to oppression that included both religious resistance and economic subversion, however, that was coupled with a readiness by many to adopt non-Jewish intellectual perspectives and to integrate socially with non-Jews. Western Sephardi valued and produced intellectual achievements and innovations. Finally, Western Sephardi were familiar with subsistence activities that required substantial risk-taking. These, then, may be said to have constituted the tone, the disposition, the understandings derived from historical conditions that Sephardi Jews brought to Curaçao.

### **Curaçao Sephardi social organization**

Here I present the third public celebration described in this work. The first two, *seú* and *karnaval*, were celebrated by all Curaçaoans. Only Jews celebrate *Yom Kippur*, and the particular *Yom Kippur* worship discussed here is celebrated largely by Curaçaoan Sephardi Jews, members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. I start the second half of this chapter on the Sephardi presence on Curaçao with a description of the Sephardi *Yom Kippur* service because its tone seems to convey a sense of the quality of contemporary Sephardi life on Curaçao. After describing the service, I discuss the social organization and history of Sephardi Jews on Curaçao that, in conjunction with the more general Sephardi history described above, shape this present-day ritual, which in turn reflects the forces that shaped it.

### **The *Yom Kippur* service**

It is the eve of *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement), arguably the most solemn holiday of the Jewish calendar. Like all Jewish holidays, this one begins at sunset

and will continue until darkness on the following day, the actual date of the holiday. The evening service is called *Kol Nidre* (All Vows) after the opening prayer, which absolves Jews from all vows made under duress in the coming year and from vows made to God, but not from one's obligations to other people. *Yom Kippur* falls on the tenth day of the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashana*). Tradition holds that on *Rosh Hashana* God writes one's fate – decides whether to inscribe one in "the book of life" – for the coming year; however, during the first ten days of the new year one's fate may be ameliorated through prayer, repentance, and charity – through atonement to God and to others. This period of melioration ends at the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*, during the service called *Ne'ilah* (the Locking), at which point one's fate for the coming year is sealed. Thus, *Kol Nidre* ushers in a time of fasting and intensified prayer.

The scene is the *Snoa*, an imposing and elegant building. At the time – 1991 and 1992 – it is about 260 years old and specially spruced-up for the holiday. The furnishings are made of mahogany, the fixtures are brass, the windows include blue stained glass, and the ceiling is vaulted in three parts (Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel 1982). There is a feeling of spaciousness. The ceiling is high and the middle of the building is open, without furniture. Worshipers report experiencing a sense of awe at the *Snoa's* splendor.

Dark falls. For the occasion, candles are lit within clear glass hurricane shades in the four 24-arm chandeliers and the multiple sconces spread throughout (Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel 1982). Only the leader of the service uses a low electric light to read from the *tebah*, a pulpit just to the west of the center of the space.

Everyone is dressed in their best, solemn clothes. Many Sephardi say that out of all holidays observed on Curaçao, both religious and secular, *Yom Kippur* is the most important to them personally. Some of the men wear tuxedos. Most men wear black suits and most women wear black dresses or dresses with black in them. Each man wears a *talit* (prayer shawl). The seven members of the congregational Board of Directors are seated on their specially designated raised bench along the north wall, with its own low partition and mahogany overhang (the *banca*). They each wear a formal dress suit, including a black cutaway coat with tail, white bow tie, white waistcoat, and a top hat – as do a couple of other men.

Although usually there are 10 to 30 people at a Sabbath service, there are 150 to 200 tonight, imparting a sense of fullness to the grand space. There are few children present, but about 70 per cent of the adult members of the congregation are in attendance. Some of the remaining adults not here tonight will come tomorrow. People who were off the island made it a point to be back, people who come to almost no other services come tonight, as do some who are Sephardi but not Jewish, and a few non-Jewish Curaçaoans who are close to Sephardi. People greet each other with the term *skritu* (written) tonight and tomorrow, and will say *skritu seyá* or *skritu seyadu* (written and sealed) after *Ne'ilah* tomorrow night, conveying the hope that each will be or has been written and inscribed in the "book of life" (Henriquez 1988). *Skritu*, *seyá*, and *seyadu* are Papiamentu words derived from the closely related Portuguese *escrito*, *selo*, and *selado*, respectively. The corresponding

Hebrew terms said by many other Jews are not used here. Though it is a solemn occasion, people appear full of excitement. It also is a special occasion, drawing together people who otherwise may see each other, but not all at once, not as finely dressed, and not in this awesome atmosphere. In short, it is what anthropologists term a rite of intensification, a time to intensify feelings of social solidarity.

The rabbi and the choir chant the *Kol Nidre* prayer, by candlelight, while the congregation stands. Although other congregations chant the prayer three times, here it is said once. Afterward, the electric lights are raised – otherwise one would be unable to read the prayer book – and the congregation sits.

The next day attendance will wax and wane as people come and go. During the morning of *Yom Kippur*, young children move to a more comfortable, adjoining space to pass the time – sometimes drawing in coloring books – while their parents worship. During the service as members exit the door of the sanctuary in the middle of the western wall, they will walk out backwards in order to show respect – to not turn one's back – to the sacred *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible) encased in the ark (*heychal*) along the opposite wall.

Outside the synagogue, *Punda* is quieter than usual. Schools and government offices are open on *Yom Kippur* (it is not an official Curaçaoan holiday), yet many businesses are closed. Most businesses owned or operated by either Ashkenazi or Sephardi Jews close on *Yom Kippur*, even when non-Jews could manage the business for the day. Businesses are not closed on other Jewish holidays. Occasionally a non-Jew will close a business, too; local newspapers contain numerous advertisements by non-Jews in which they wish the Jews *skritu i seyadu* – in effect indicating that *Yom Kippur* is a day recognized by many Curaçaoans.

Services during the day of *Yom Kippur* will include reading in Papiamentu the book of Jonah from the Bible, and one recitation in Portuguese of the *Veedui* (the confessional prayer). When called to the *tebah* – today as well as on other days – members give a short, formal bow to simultaneous participants in the ritual. As in many other Jewish congregations, the rabbi twice will prostrate himself in front of the *heychal*, recalling the prostrations of the High Priest in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem on behalf of the people of Israel. Both the rabbi and the congregation's president will address those present. The President will speak on the state of the congregation. In the early afternoon, there will be a break in the worship; members will gather for a presentation by a respected member about a topic of interest, followed by a discussion. In 1991, the topic is the Spanish Expulsion and Inquisition, and the discussion issue is how members of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel should approach the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the Americas. During the *skaba* (Memorial) service, the rabbi will read the names of deceased ritual leaders and a member of the congregation will read an edited list of deceased congregants. This latter list is difficult to decide upon. It is extremely long, so the congregation is attempting to edit it without omitting the ancestor of any current member. The list is read in a monotone, producing a mesmerizing silence.

By the time of *Ne'ilah* as many, if not more, people will be present as attended *Kol Nidre*, more of them will be children, and some will be there for the first time



this *Yom Kippur*. The day's worship by this relatively liberal congregation in terms of its rituals will conclude in the open courtyard, with the service called *Birkat Haluna* (Blessing of the Moon), an "ultraconservative" tradition maintained by congregational regulation (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:493). While saying *skritu i seyadu*, participants will break the fast with fruit juices and *pan levi*, a crisp sponge cookie made with flour, eggs, and sugar, seasoned with cinnamon and vanilla (Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Sisterhood 1982). Within thirty minutes almost everyone will have left for home to eat. Many will continue their break-fast with *webu batí*, beaten egg stirred into coffee (Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Sisterhood 1982).

Contemporary *Yom Kippur* services at the *Snoa* manifest the history of Sephardi Jews living on Curaçao, including the dispositions brought with them to the island. The *banca* for the Board of Directors reflects a social system, despite its potential for fluctuations, with formalized positions. As Hofstadter (1963:56) writes:

The style of a church or sect is to a great extent a function of social class, and the forms of worship and religious doctrine congenial to one social group may be uncongenial to another. The possessing classes have usually shown much interest in rationalizing religion and in observing highly developed liturgical forms.

This appears to be the case at Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. The splendid surroundings reflect the contributions of an economic elite, religious fervor, and pride in "the Nation." The formal dress, the impressive illumination, the bows, indeed, the whole tenor of the ritual reflects pride in their, and in their ancestors', accomplishments, and self-identification as a people with dignity. Karner (1969:27) describes the formality I found to be present in the *Yom Kippur* service as characteristic of Curaçao Sephardi:

When circumstances in the nineteenth century made it feasible, their tastes and orientations were certainly fulfilled and they culminated in a refinement of style, formality in etiquette, and setting a high value on the "good things" in life.

Similarly, the locally traditional foods and greetings, the local variations in ritual, and the maintenance of selected conservative rituals reflect the desire to express and to preserve a legacy, a specific history occupying a unique niche within larger Jewish history.

Many "threads" have combined to produce the *Yom Kippur* service described above and the character of the current Sephardi presence on Curaçao. In the first half of this chapter I discussed some of the influential historical factors prior to Sephardi settlement on Curaçao. In the remaining sections of this chapter I discuss "threads" present in Sephardi life on Curaçao. As a "complex whole" (Tylor 1891), though not one that is clearly bounded, Curaçaoan Sephardi culture has been constructed out of multiple aspects of social life that are intertwined complexly.



Both secular and religious forms of maintaining social order are involved in Sephardi political relations through political institutions active in both arenas. In myriad contexts, these institutions affect Sephardi economic practices and relations, both on and off Curaçao. Also, economics and politics, both religious and secular, are shaped by Sephardi kin relations.

Conflict surrounding Jeosuah Piza during the years 1816–22, discussed by Emmanuel and Emmanuel (1970:304–328), serves to illustrate the multiplex character of Sephardi social relations. Piza was a Dutch Sephardi cantor (chanter of Jewish prayers – thus, educated in Jewish religious ritual but not ordained as a rabbi), referred to Congregation Mikvé Israel by the Sephardi *pamassim* (literally, providers; members of the Board of Directors) in Amsterdam, and brought to Curaçao to replace a rabbi who had died in 1815. When in 1819 the *pamassim* refused to discharge Piza, a large number of congregants resigned – illegally (see the sections, “Religious Organization” and “Religio-political Organization,” below) – and subsequently were excommunicated by the *pamassim*. Reconciliation, not entirely accepted by all parties, was achieved with the assistance of the island governor in 1821.

The conflicts surrounding Piza involved a dispute over religious authority between him and a lay congregant who had been serving as a ritual specialist. Their conflict became linked with conflicts between two factions of wealthy Sephardi, one of which, among Sephardi, held the most wealth based in Curaçaoan-located property, and the other, probably wealthier, group with most of its wealth held outside of Curaçao. Each faction was supported by congregants reckoned as kin, excluding some supporters whose overlapping affiliations complicated their allegiances. Middle-class and relatively impoverished members of the congregation sided with the faction upon which they most depended, with congregational employees being pressured to side with the *pamassim*, for example. Finally, as a matter of record, the island civil authorities sided with the *pamassim* and Piza, but informally were loath to alienate wealthy dissenters. Relations based on wealth, economic practices, kinship, religion, and political organization were inseparable during this period and continue to be connected closely today.<sup>6</sup>

As I continue to discuss the Sephardi presence on Curaçao, I look at events and conditions, from the arrival of Sephardi to the *Yom Kippur* services described earlier. Then I discuss Sephardi economic activities, religious organization, religio-political organization, and kinship. Unless otherwise indicated, the following sections draw heavily on material contained in the two-volume *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* by Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel (1970). The second volume is composed entirely of appendices, most of which are translations into English of original documents. Isaac Emmanuel was a Sephardi from Salonika, ordained as a rabbi and holding a doctorate in social sciences. He served as rabbi to Congregation Mikvé Israel for three years beginning in 1936. After that he spent years researching the history of Curaçaoan Jews. Isaac Emmanuel also is the author of *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao* (1957), a voluminous work mainly on Curaçaoan Sephardi funerary practices, early Curaçaoan Sephardi tombstones,

and the lives of those buried beneath. The Emmanuels base their work on a variety of archival materials, including letters, petitions, congregational records, court documents, tax records, newspapers, and family memoirs. In general, these records tend to provide information about conflicts, institutional decisions, and economic conditions. The Emmanuels' history is written from a traditional Sephardi Jewish point of view. Individuals are presented and evaluated from a moral perspective that values Jewish solidarity against outsiders and reconciliation of conflicts with other Jews – provided that traditional ritual and theology are not threatened by such reconciliation.

A second major source for the following is *The Sephardics of Curaçao: A study of socio-cultural patterns in flux*, written by Frances P. Karner in 1969. This book is based on Karner's Columbia University master's thesis, and is the only published anthropological monograph about Curaçaoan Sephardi. Karner's work is noteworthy for another reason. Though no longer living on Curaçao, she grew up as a Curaçaoan Sephardi, with a Curaçaoan Sephardi mother and a Dutch non-Jewish father. For her research, Karner gathered data about marriage and family patterns, and several other aspects of Curaçaoan Sephardi social organization that is valuable in its own right. However, of additional interest are the factors Karner sees as worthy of research, and her commentary on her results because they reflect perspectives found among Curaçaoan Sephardi. The section on kinship, below, draws mostly from Karner's work. In addition to citing her work, I also incorporate Karner's perspective into my discussion as if she were an additional "informant," rather than interrogating her text directly.

## Sephardi settlement on Curaçao

The first Jewish resident of Curaçao was Samuel Cohen, interpreter and then chief steward of the Dutch conquering force of 1634. He was born in Portugal, lived in Holland, and left Curaçao after eight years. In 1651 the Dutch West India Company (WIC) offered free land to Jews who would settle on Curaçao, largely in the hope that the Jews would start sugar cane plantations. The contracts of 1651 and 1654 did not draw Jewish settlers in any numbers. However, Jewish settlement began in earnest with the 1659 contingent of seventy members. Although there were a number of extremely wealthy and influential Sephardi in Amsterdam and Rotterdam at this time, the Sephardi who settled in Curaçao did not arrive particularly wealthy. At best, some received loans from, acted as representatives of, or entered into trade with financially well-off Sephardi in the Netherlands. Some such connections were based on kinship ties.

The 1659 charter, arranged by Isaac Da Costa, was contracted as Dutch Sephardi influence in the Netherlands was at its height, in between the liberal charters awarded the Dutch Sephardi settlers in Guiana and Cayenne. The original charter has been lost (Yerushalmi 1982), but it appears to have contained official recognition and support of the Jewish Curaçaoan community as a unit, allowance of the purchase of slaves – at first slaves had been prohibited to Jews on Curaçao –

permission to build houses, and complete religious freedom. Beginning in 1659 the Amsterdam Sephardi community also began assisting in the immigration of poorer Sephardi to Curaçao (Kaplan 1982). All subsequent Holland-to-Curaçao ships of the period contained at least one Jewish family. As in Amsterdam, many new settlers arrived with little Jewish religious knowledge, only recently having been *conversos* (Kaplan 1982).

The Sephardi population on Curaçao tended to ebb and flow over the centuries, chiefly in conjunction with changing economic conditions (Table 3). Though census figures for Curaçao Sephardi prior to the nineteenth century are not well documented, the organized Sephardi population on Curaçao may have reached its demographic peak around 1750, at which time it may have numbered as many as 2,000 (Karner 1969:29), and may have constituted nearly one-half the Euro-Curaçaoan population (Holzberg 1976). In adjacent decades the Jewish population appears to have ranged between 1,300 and 1,500 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970; Karner 1969:29). The total Curaçaoan population in 1785 was 8,500, including 3,000 to 3,200 Euro-Curaçaoans. Of them, about 1,200 were Jews. Jewish numbers declined to 805 by 1821, concurrent with internal Sephardi conflict, but grew to 937 in 1826 after Jews were granted Dutch citizenship. With an economic depression on the island, numbers dropped to 747 in 1833. As economic conditions improved, the Sephardi population grew to 963 in 1865 – compared to 1,855 Protestants living on Curaçao in that year, most of whom were Euro-Curaçaoan, for Afro-Curaçaoans largely were Catholic. Then, in 1886, subsequent to the *Derechos Antillanos* (Chapter 5) and the consequent economic decline, the Sephardi population again dropped to 754 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:415).

Over the past 100 years the size of the Sephardi population has continued to decrease. Karner (1969) reports a peak of 1,000 Sephardi in 1894, with the number dropping dramatically to 300 by 1968. At the time of my fieldwork – with numbers augmented through marriage, Jews from elsewhere, and Jews with dual membership in the two Curaçaoan Jewish congregations – Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel announced in 1991 that it had 367 members, 111 of whom were children, while in 1992 there were 365 members, 130 of whom were children. The Netherlands Antillean census of 1992, therefore, apparently undercounts Jews, for it found a total of only 381 Jews on Curaçao, which includes members of both the predominantly Sephardi and the predominantly Ashkenazi congregations.

Calculated another way, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel announced in 1992 that the number of member households on the island was 121 in 1991 and 131 in 1992. I estimate that about forty of those were not Portuguese Sephardi households, although about ten of the forty were Eastern Sephardi households – mostly descendants of people who immigrated to Curaçao early in the twentieth century. These figures include households that are partially Portuguese Sephardi (e.g., those in which only one spouse has Portuguese Sephardi ancestors), and some current Sephardi members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel have as few as one Portuguese Sephardi grandparent. During the congregation's demographic peak, in the mid-eighteenth century, Congregation Mikvé Israel consisted

Table 3 Sephardi population of Curaçao (1745–1992)

Year	Sephardi population
1745–50	1,300 to ~2,000 270 households
1785	~1,200
1821	805
1826	937
1833	747
1865	963
1886	754
1894	1,000
1968	~300
1992	~130 NPS* residing on Curaçao (each has at least 1 NPS grandparent) 381 total Jews according to census 365 members of CMI-E** 131 households in CMI-E**

Sources: 1745–50, population (Karner 1969:29); 1745–50, households (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:180); 1785 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:277); 1821 and 1826 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:302); 1833 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:346); 1865 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:368); 1886 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:415); 1894 (Karner 1969:29); 1968 (Karner 1969:68); 1992, Netherlands Portuguese Sephardi (calculation from author's fieldnotes); 1992, Jews on Curaçao (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, printout on January 14, 1994 of 1992 census results); 1992, members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (author's fieldnotes); 1992, households of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (calculated from congregational membership roster).

#### Notes

\* Netherlands Portuguese Sephardi.

\*\* Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel.

~ Denotes an approximation.

of just a little over double the number of households of the early 1990s. Emmanuel and Emmanuel report 270 households present in 1745 (1970:180). However, households prior to the twentieth century included more individuals per household. The generation of Sephardi born between 1850 and 1865 averaged 6.2 children per household, while the Sephardi born between 1910 and 1940 averaged 2.46 children per household (Karner 1969:12, 64). Thus, during this century the absolute number of households affiliated with Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, the size of these households, and the degree of biological relatedness to the Portuguese Sephardi settlers of Curaçao have all declined.

## Economic activity

Over the first 300 years of Dutch colonization, the level of Curaçaoan economic prosperity varied widely (see also Chapter 2). As a whole, Curaçaoan prosperity

depended largely on the Jews (Marks 1976). Sephardi first grew sugar and tobacco, later indigo, lemons, oranges, and cotton. They may have attempted cantaloupe, watermelon, eggplant, and okra. One planter grew potatoes, beans, and melons in 1792. Cattle were raised beginning in the late seventeenth century. Rustling sometimes was a problem. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – after thirteen closely spaced drought years – the Sephardi instituted a special fast and a prayer for rain into their worship service.

Sephardi turned to the exportation of horses and lumber instead of agriculture. Many moved to Willemstad and opened businesses. Shipping became the major Sephardi economic activity. Jews were denied full access to the African slave trade, but a few slavers were Curaçaoan Sephardi. One member of the community relates that an ancestor had a fleet of 146 ships. Five Sephardi tombstones in Curaçao are engraved with ships.

In 1720 Jews performed almost all Curaçaoan shipping. Into the middle of the same century Jews were the leading marine insurers, ship owners, and merchants. Sephardi wealth tended to be in ships, merchandise, and accounts receivable from abroad, while the wealth of Curaçaoan Dutch Protestants tended to reside in plantations. Sephardi sustained the Curaçaoan economy in the eighteenth century at the risk of life and fortune, for Spain sought to confiscate contraband merchandise or to imprison and inquisit Jews, and England sought to monopolize trade.

Between 1733 and 1780, forty-one Sephardi were captured and one killed while engaged in shipping. Some of these were captured more than once. Two Sephardi spent as long as five years in jail. One Sephardi converted to Catholicism in order to secure his release, only to convert back to Judaism when free. Spanish treatment of Jews was harsher than that of other captives. A number of Sephardi captured by Spanish authorities were taken as far away as Cadiz, Spain. Of these, a couple were threatened with deportation to Africa, and the fate of one was never revealed. Huge sums were paid in ransom for the captives, which – as reflected in Curaçaoan tax records – resulted in an observable decrease in Sephardi wealth after the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Political pressure from a variety of sources often was necessary to effect the release of captives, too. Though Spanish forces committed most of these offenses, a few Sephardi were captured by the English and one by the Americans (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:222–226). Despite all this, Curaçao's excellent harbor, its location in the western hemisphere, Sephardi family and business contacts on both sides of the Atlantic, and Sephardi knowledge of languages combined to encourage the practice of trading from the outset of settlement.

Economic success was reflected only partially in Sephardi slave holdings. While constituting about one-half the Euro-Curaçaoan population in 1765, Sephardi owned about 16 per cent of enslaved people, 860 of the 5,534 slaves on Curaçao. Upon the emancipation of enslaved people by the Dutch, in 1863, Jews owned 1,851 of 6,751 enslaved people, or 27 per cent, despite controlling about 45 per cent of Curaçao's private capital.

Sephardi traded goods and provisions to colonies in exchange for commodities.

They were able to hold down trading costs by employing relatives as overseas agents and by using their own ships. Some operated a kind of floating store that would travel from place to place, selling and buying at each port. The earliest trading partners included other Caribbean islands, North America, and the Netherlands, but most trade was with South America, despite the additional risk to Jews of arrest by the Inquisition.

Shipping was affected by international political conditions. Jews prospered during the American Revolutionary War, but for the remainder of the eighteenth century, depression, French interference with trade, and the English occupation of Curaçao in the early 1800s combined to depress Sephardi commerce. In the wake of the decline of mercantilism, around the mid-nineteenth century, Sephardi traders prospered once again. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, one Sephardi firm on Curaçao, the Jesuruns, lent money to the government of Venezuela. When the economy was doing well, nepotism in Sephardi businesses “was the order of the day” (Karner 1969:31). Beginning about 1871 many Sephardi became shipping agents for outside companies rather than operating their own trading enterprises. Many also began to enter the professions during this century (Karner 1969). Also indicating Sephardi prominence in Curaçaoan economic activity is that, for the first fifty-eight years of its existence (from 1884 through 1942), the president of the Curaçao Chamber of Commerce and Industry was a Sephardi. Over 13 of the next 42 years, three Curaçao Sephardi, one Curaçaoan Eastern Sephardi, and one son of a Curaçao Sephardi father served as chamber president (see Gomes Casseres 1984 for a history of the chamber).

Sephardi have prospered in the twentieth century (see Chapter 5), though relatively few became significantly wealthy. Instead, most Sephardi now are able to live comfortably, and are not likely to become impoverished by, for example, disasters at sea. Though a few Sephardi remain influential in Curaçaoan economic affairs, often due to the scope of the businesses they operate, the Curaçaoan economy as a whole now includes multiple, significant sources of production and capital that are outside of Sephardi control.

Changing patterns in Sephardi subsistence activities and in a variety of lifestyle components during the twentieth century may be associated with changing working patterns. For example, by 1932 all Sephardi businesses remained open on the Jewish Sabbath; after World War II women increasingly began working outside the home (Karner 1969). The Curaçaoan economy became more greatly enmeshed in the world economic system; life became more secular and individualistic; and families became a less dominant social force.

## Religious organization

The Curaçao-born, Amsterdam-trained rabbi of Congregation Mikvé Israel from 1764 to 1815, Jahacob Lopez da Fonseca, illustrated the determination of the descendants of *conversos* to revitalize and maintain the open practice of Judaism. In a sermon delivered in Amsterdam upon his Curaçao appointment he said:

One of the attributes characterizing the commonwealth of Israel is “a rose among the thorns” (Song of Songs 2,2); the rose, while still in the bud, has small thorns which cannot prick; but when it opens up and spreads its pleasant smell abroad, its thorns become prickly and may be harmful. The same applies to this commonwealth: so long as it is like a closed rose, a bud which does not disseminate the pleasant smell of its virtues, it will have no thorns to protect it; but as soon as it becomes an open rose, disseminating the smells of its virtues and privileges, it develops large thorns to protect it. Therefore, it is compared to the rose among the thorns, an open rose bountiful in its generosity, and not a closed rose characterized by stinginess.

(Kaplan 1982:210–211)

Congregation Mikvé Israel had a total of ten rabbis in over three hundred years, from its inception to its merger with Temple Emanu-El (see below, p. 107), and went long periods with no official rabbi. Still, community life centered on the synagogue until late in the nineteenth century. The first rabbi (*haham*<sup>7</sup>) arrived in 1674. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the community had a circumciser, a cemetery, a ritual bather, and a mechanism to care for impoverished, ill Jews. In 1745 there were two rabbis and sixteen ecclesiastical employees. In 1746 one writer referred to the Curaçaoan Jewish community as the “Mother City of all the islands in America,” (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:180). In the same century, twenty-nine Jewish charitable societies were founded on Curaçao. Money was sent to Jewish communities around the world and the island continued to serve as a haven for *conversos*.

A branch synagogue, *Neve Shalom* (Abode of Peace), was inaugurated in 1764, located in *Otrobanda*. Rents in *Otrobanda* were cheaper, so it was a haven for middle-income and poorer Jews of the time. Traditional Judaic limits on the distance one can walk on the Sabbath necessitated the second synagogue, but it was never granted the status of a separate community or the right to operate its own cemetery. It closed in 1817 due to the scarcity of Jews living in *Otrobanda*.

In the early nineteenth century synagogue attendance remained high but enforcement of religious law weakened. From 1816 through 1855 there were no rabbis, only a series of assessors (lay religious leaders), and cantors (chanters of religious prayer). Reforms to the prayer service began to be introduced, though opposition to some reforms led one faction to request government intercession and the governor prohibited some changes.

The congregation’s rabbi from 1856 to 1868 was the last to deliver sermons in Portuguese. He was orthodox, but willing to introduce reforms. During his tenure a group of prominent Sephardi broke off to form their own congregation. They aligned themselves religiously with the Jewish Reform Movement (a movement begun by secularly educated European and North American Ashkenazi Jews), called themselves the “Dutch Jewish Reform Community,” and were recognized officially by the Dutch government in 1865. This was the first time in Curaçaoan history that a second Jewish congregation received official government



recognition. Unlike the case for members of *Neve Shalom*, members of Temple *Emanu-El* (the Lord is With Us) were not subject to the authority of the Board of Congregation Mikvé Israel. In 1932 the two synagogues signed a friendship agreement to cooperate on some community-wide functions. When members of the two congregations married, wedding ceremonies were performed according to the groom's tradition.

The number of daily services at Mikvé Israel dropped from the traditional three per day in the mid-nineteenth century to one or two per week by the end of the century (Karner 1969). From its opening in 1867, until 1962 (except for two three-year periods), Temple *Emanu-El* had no ordained rabbi of its own. Congregation Mikvé Israel also had no rabbi from 1868 until 1936, and then only for three years. Its next rabbi served from 1960 until 1963, and introduced English prayer. By that time attendance at Mikvé Israel was poor. It was difficult to form a *minyan* (the quorum of ten adult men required for the recitation of some prayers).

Congregations Mikvé Israel and *Emanu-El* merged in 1964. Of the combined congregants, 30 per cent had formerly been members of Temple *Emanu-El*. The merged congregation is named the "United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel." Rabbi Emmanuel opposed the terms of the merger. Religious worship at the merged congregation combines elements of Reform, Reconstructionist, and Sephardi traditions. Emmanuel thought that adopting Reconstructionism introduced religious irrelevancies, ended the Sephardi character of Jewish prayer, and violated community historical obligations. He also believed that the changes would not promote Sephardi cohesion.

The trend for Sephardi of both congregations since the mid-nineteenth century is toward decreasing participation in Judaic religious ritual, though current members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel include many people who identify strongly as Jews, support the congregation financially, and aid in preparations for congregational social functions. A lesser number attend worship services regularly. A variety of reasons for this decline have been postulated, though the exact effects of each cause are unclear. Indeed, at the outset of my research, the Board asked that I attempt to explain the reason for the decline in participation in religious worship. I began to draft a report to the Board, but never submitted it. I found myself unable to recommend a specific course of action that could be addressed by the Board. Members had argued that a variety of issues interfered with their ability to attend services: difficulty in finding parking; the necessity to walk a long distance in unsafe areas from one's car to the synagogue; the travel distance from home; the lack of air conditioning; the dress code; that older members do not like to drive at night or in the rain; that members with children cannot find babysitters; that people are at work at the time of Saturday morning services; and that people do not have time to go home, shower, dress, and return to *Punda* between the close of business on Friday afternoons and the beginning of Friday evening services. Some members complained that the service either was too long or too short, that it was boring, or that there was too much talking. Board members tended to discount these as "excuses" rather than "explanations." In addition, members temporarily



traveled off the island for vacation, business, or medical treatment, and to visit friends and family, so that fewer than the total number of members were available to attend at any given time. One person thought that going to services was a “weak,” “corny” thing to do – that it was unfashionable or unsophisticated. Others objected to features in the worship service (e.g., the rabbi’s sermon, the amount of Hebrew used, and that women had too large or too small a role in the ritual).

One explanation proposed for the decline in attendance prior to the 1960s was the limited religious education available to children since the middle of the nineteenth century. This situation has changed in recent decades, since the two Jewish congregations on Curaçao have combined to operate an afternoon religious school for children up to the age of 13. The school may lessen or slow future decline in worship attendance, but its previous lack does not explain the present continuing decline. A second factor was proposed by people who thought that the death of a Curaçaoan Sephardi Jew, George Maduro, in the Holocaust of World War II affected not so much attendance at services as the willingness of Curaçaoan Sephardi to identify as Jews. These people thought that some Sephardi came to understand being Jewish as a threat to their existence and so limited their involvement in a variety of identifiably Jewish activities. Third, Rabbi Emmanuel predicted that the liberalization in religious practice as a result of the merger agreement between the two Sephardi congregations in 1964 was a factor that would hasten the disappearance of Curaçao Sephardi; he would argue that liberalized ritual practices fail to provide the religious framework necessary for services meaningful to congregation members. However, this does not explain the decline in attendance at worship services prior to the merger.

I have argued (Benjamin 1990), along the lines of Karner (1969), that changes in social patterns over the past century have produced diminishing interest among Curaçao Sephardi in traditional Jewish religious practices. Sephardi participation in western secular intellectual life has grown (Karner 1969). Children went to the Netherlands and to the United States to study. Sephardi founded literary societies; became journalists and authors; and one, Daniel de Leon, became active in the American Socialist Movement (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). Others formed or joined non-religious service organizations, such as the Freemasons, Rotarians, and *Club Entre Nous* (Club Among Us), a women’s club that set up a public park and distributed food to the needy at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). The Curaçaoan Chamber of Commerce and Industry became a focus of some Sephardi activity (see Gomes Casseres 1984), while Curaçaoan theatre was promoted by Curaçaoan Sephardi beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970). Religious activity was a key organizer of Sephardi life for at least two centuries, but it is less so at present. In the next section I discuss the political organization and the role in everyday life of the Curaçao Sephardi congregation(s).

## Religio-political organization

About eighteenth-century Sephardi, Emmanuel and Emmanuel (1970:234) write: "The social life and religious life of the Jew ... were inextricably interwoven." This has been a common condition in Jewish communities, and such semi-autonomy often was found among Sephardi in Moslem countries and in many traditional societies (Zenner and Deshen 1982). Zenner and Deshen (1982:21) write: "The internal organization of Jewish communities is the product of both external forces and of Jewish tradition." Below I discuss internal political organization among Curaçaoan Sephardi.

Until 1756, the economic elite of the Congregation chose the *parnassim* from community notables. From that point on, *parnassim* were elected annually. Most years the *Mahmad* (literally, Wise Body; the Board of Directors) consisted of three *parnassim*, though at times there have been five-member Boards.

Indicating the importance of wealth in choosing *parnassim*, the number of *parnassim*, after a few years of five, was decreased again to three in 1771 because there were too few affluent people from different families able to serve on the Board. Similarly, in the past, ritual honors were accorded to those who gave generous donations to the congregation. One of these honors, Bridegroom of the Law during the *Yom Kippur* service, could not be appointed to anyone who had not reimbursed the congregation for any financial assistance it had granted (see Loeb 1982 for a discussion of ways to accrue prestige in an Iranian congregation). However, *parnassim* of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel no longer need be wealthy to serve; now each person nominated and elected has attained community respect based on personal attributes or on varying kinds of achievement.

Since the merger with Temple Emanu-El (in 1964), Boards have consisted of seven *parnassim*. Each *parnas* (singular form) serves a two-year term, with one-half of the terms expiring each year – four seats one year and three the next. Although they must prevail in a formal election before joining the Board, new *parnassim* are selected through a process that also is consensual. A nominating committee selects the year's candidates after determining the members available to serve and discerning the congregation's preferences. It is unusual for nominated candidates to be opposed. I was present for two elections, and only one of the seven *parnassim* elected during that period had an opponent. In that instance, the opponent was a current *parnas* who did not wish to serve another term and lost the election. In effect, then, Board members have been determined through informal conversations among members of the congregation. After sounding out the membership and potential candidates, the nominating committee has proposed the most favorable candidates, who then obtain their authority to serve through an election, with votes cast in secret.

There is an attempt to draw the *parnassim* from a variety of extended families, to keep the Board diverse and representative. Near relatives are not allowed to sit on the Board (now known in Papiamentu as the *direktiva*) at the same time. A woman may not be a *parnas*, though the President of the Congregation's Sisterhood is a

non-voting observer at *direktiva* meetings. The congregation's rabbi may attend meetings only if invited; however, recently the rabbi has been invited to meetings routinely.

The current Board consists of four officers – President, Vice-President, Treasurer (*Gabay*), and Secretary. Also, one *parnas* serves as Assessor, a position requiring one to manage congregation-owned property and to make all burial arrangements. In addition, there are three members now called Directors. The Assessor and President's responsibilities are time-consuming, so no one person occupies both roles simultaneously. The Assessor may be any officer or Director other than the President. Though *parnassim* are elected for two-year terms by secret ballot of the membership at large, Board officers are selected internally for a one-year term by the members of each year's sitting Board. I am told that Board decisions are made by consensus, but that the President of the Board generally has the determining voice.

Scheduled meetings are held monthly, though additional meetings may be called when necessary. Minutes are kept; however, the discussions at Board meetings are strictly secret. My experience has been that the *parnassim* protect the confidentiality of Board deliberations thoroughly. Public decisions of the Board will be made known, as well as the general process by which the Board operates, but to the best of my knowledge, agendas, positions, and personal issues are not disclosed outside of Board meetings.

The Board has absolute authority over congregational matters. There are nine topics on which it must consult the *konseho di ancianos* (Council of Elders, comprised of all former Board members) – for example, expenditures above a certain amount and when appointing a rabbi – but the Board, not the *ancianos*, makes the final decision. The *ancianos* elect three officers of their own, but the *konseho* is a relatively informal organization, with little regular structured activity.

I asked several Board members whether they view themselves, or are viewed by members, as holding moral authority. My question stemmed from the fact that current *parnassim* administer a religious institution, and because the *parnassim* of earlier centuries have claimed moral authority (see below, pp. 113–14). Each Board member I spoke with claimed to hold no superior moral ability, and disclaimed moral authority over congregation members. However, several Board members thought that as *parnas* they did have a responsibility to be an exemplar. For example, I was told that several made an extra effort to attend religious services and to conform to social conventions of responsible behavior. Although this aspect of their role has diminished during the past century, seating positions in the *Snoa* and dress on *Yom Kippur* reflect the continuing *parnassim* responsibility for some degree of moral leadership.

Formal involvement of the membership as a whole in direct decision-making is rare. It is required, for example, when changes in the synagogue ritual are proposed, but only after the Board first meets with the rabbi, and next meets with the *ancianos* and the rabbi. Members then vote on the proposed change only at the second of two required general meetings. No such membership meetings were held during my

fieldwork. The only one I know about was held a year or two before my 1989 visit. That meeting is remembered as including an acrimonious debate over whether to increase the role of women in synagogue ritual. The subject was so divisive that it was decided not to make any changes. By the time of my fieldwork, most people wanted to put the subject behind them, to heal the wounds, and to go forward with current practices. Still, the topic continued to produce some discord. My understanding is that since my fieldwork women have been given the opportunity to perform additional religious rituals in the synagogue. I am told that some opposed this decision, and that those in opposition discontinued attending religious services in protest. As seen in the Piza example (p. 100), this type of action is rooted firmly in the congregation's traditions.

Although the *parnassim* have absolute authority over congregational decisions, they tend to be a stable body that makes decisions in close concord with congregational opinion. The issue of women's participation in religious rituals in the synagogue indicates, however, that an occasional issue is so divisive that consensus is not possible. Nevertheless, virtually every extended family can count one or more former *parnassim* among its members. Thus, extended families regularly include someone knowledgeable about the Board's decision-making process and the kinds of considerations it takes into account. In addition, widely shared kinship ties, history, and subsistence practices have produced much consensus in understanding. Thus, in general the Board's decisions closely reflect congregational interests.

In the past, *parnassim* brooked no contradictions to their authority and exerted their power so strongly that new officers eventually were required to swear that they would be impartial. Yet, members often did not wish to serve. Fines and excluding recalcitrant potential *parnassim* from some religious activities were punishments invoked to enforce acceptance of the responsibility.

The earliest record of Mikvé Israel congregational/community regulations (*haskamot*) is an incomplete record of the version ratified in 1688. That version is a revision of the *haskamot* of 1659 and 1671. It remained in effect, with modifications and additions, until the merger of Mikvé Israel with Temple Emanu-El in 1964. In it, *parnassim* were required to serve if elected, were to supervise the proper operation of congregational-ritual functions, and were to resolve disputes between members, including public quarreling. Only if the *parnassim* were unable to resolve a dispute would it be referred to the island governor. Jews were prohibited by the *haskamot* from discussing religion with non-Jews. The *parnassim* were responsible for collecting the community tax levied by civil authorities, and were the sole authoritative body of the Jewish community in Curaçao. That is, no competing congregation was to be founded. "In the event that an arrogant, bold or headstrong person attempts to do so, whoever he may be, he shall incur the penalty of *Beraha* [literally, Blessing; the censure of various types of activity, removed only after the completion of appropriate redress], he and his followers" (Mikvé Israel *haskamot* from 1688, cited in Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:544).

*Parnassim* ruled, for example, on gambling, dues, ritual duties, dietary

compliance, and decorum in the synagogue. Violators were subject to fines and temporary, or permanent, excommunication. To rejoin the congregation after excommunication, one had to confess publicly in the synagogue, without shoes, from a low bench, in a contrite voice and often also resolve the original issue in a satisfactory fashion, which might include a fine. *Parnassim* requested the civil government to banish from the island a few people deemed incorrigible. For example, one Jewish woman who may have been a prostitute was banished from Curaçao in 1674, and as mentioned in Chapter 2, David Aboab, a religious teacher, was banished in 1746.

Congregation Mikvé Israel, prior to Jewish citizenship, was a partially self-governing enclave within Curaçao; it was significantly successful in maintaining a distinctive jural system. For example, when, in the eighteenth century, the Dutch government passed a law that community property arrangements would be in effect for all marriages, Sephardi objected and in 1740 received an exception for Jewish marriages in Curaçao and in Surinam that continued to be valid in Curaçao at least as recently as 1970 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:149). They objected because the Jewish wedding ritual includes the signing of a *ketubah*, a marriage contract, prior to the wedding ceremony. In case of a divorce, the *ketubah* includes provisions for dispensing property brought into a marriage. This exception allowed a Jewish religious tradition and social practice to remain in effect, and it aided in maintaining the congregation as a legal-political institution.

*Parnassim*, along with congregational rabbis, also had the difficult task of educating former *conversos* about Judaism – difficult because it included enforcing Judaic law on adults who largely were ignorant of it and may not have accepted all its terms easily (Kaplan 1982). As late as 1762 a few Curaçao Sephardi still had parents living in Portugal where, if they practiced Judaism, it must have been in secret. Only in 1822 did the last Sephardi arrive directly from Portugal (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:750).

Religious organization also was political and social organization. The *Mahmad* was recognized as the legal governing body of Curaçaoan Jews, though it was subject both to the Amsterdam *Mahmad* and to local civil authority. Since only one Jewish congregation was allowed on Curaçao until 1864, the *parnassim* of Congregation Mikvé Israel had extensive authority over every Jewish resident of Curaçao. During those centuries, the *parnassim* excommunicated, expelled people from congregational organizations, fined, had people banished from Curaçao, forbade marriages, and ordered that the corpses of people who had been excommunicated be treated with disrespect, such as by stoning or dragging the caskets. Disputes about decisions of the *parnassim* might be appealed “up-the-ladder” through either religious or civil institutions. At times appeals went through both Jewish and civil institutions until finally arriving in the chambers of either the WIC or the Dutch government. Different judgments at differing levels in the two institutional “ladders” could make resolving the conflict quite complex. Since Congregation Mikvé Israel was a distinct legal entity for almost two centuries, individual Sephardi often were appointed to represent Congregation Mikvé Israel to the

Curaçaoan civil authorities. In general, Curaçaoan civil authorities treated members of Congregation Mikvé Israel beneficently; although at times harassed by local officials, legal protections were maintained, sometimes due to pressure from Dutch superiors.

In 1825, the Jews in Curaçao were granted full citizenship by the Dutch and gradually began to assume civil responsibilities outside of the Sephardi community. Jews in the Netherlands had attained this status in 1796. Now when declaring an oath in court a Curaçao Jew could say, "This is true so help me God" (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:335). Previously the oath administered to Jews included the words that, if one answered questions falsely, one "should be plagued and punished now and forever with all the plagues that God visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah and also on Korah, Dathan and Abiram for their sins ...." (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:773).

In return for full citizenship, Sephardi were to relinquish their previous community rights. However, after negotiation they were allowed to retain several practices that would have been illegal at the time. Sephardi could continue to butcher meat according to Jewish dietary laws, to operate a Jewish orphans fund, to use a *ketubah* when forming and dissolving marriages, and to levy as needed a fee or tax, called a *finta*, upon members of the congregation to fund congregational obligations. As with other religious groups, the spiritual leader of the congregation, the rabbi, continued to be paid by the civil government.

## Kinship

For the first two centuries of Sephardi settlement on Curaçao, and thereafter to a lesser degree, marriage, as a practice understood to affect congregational social relations, was regulated by the *parnassim*. As written into the *haskamot*, at least from 1750 through 1833, the *Mahmad* was required to approve marriages. Without its approval, the rabbi – a congregational employee – was not authorized to write the *ketubah* or to perform the wedding. Beginning at least in the *haskamot* of 1726, no one other than the *haham* was empowered to perform a Jewish wedding on Curaçao. Of course, when there was no *haham* on the island, as occurred from 1815 to 1856, this requirement must have been modified. In addition, women, at least during the years 1750–1809, were not allowed to enter into marriage without the consent of their parents, and women who had premarital intercourse were considered ineligible for marriage.

*Mahmad* approval of marriages seems to have been designed to accomplish several purposes: to ensure conformance to Jewish legal and ritual religious traditions; to support the authority of kin elders; to maintain the congregation as a bounded legal, religious, and social entity; to reaffirm the authority of the *parnassim* and the *haham*; to preserve kin-based divisions in wealth; and to protect patriarchal social organization. Kinship thus was an essential factor in maintaining social order. Marriage between people from families with large disparities in wealth was frowned upon, and the wishes of men were given priority over those of women. In

addition, although men were not sanctioned for having sexual intercourse with Afro-Curaçaoan women before and during marriage (and doing so did not affect men's rights in the community), no marriages between Sephardi and Afro-Curaçaoans were allowed by the congregation. Nonetheless, it was not uncommon for young Sephardi men to have sexual intercourse with Afro-Curaçaoan women anytime after puberty despite strict moral discipline in other realms. Sephardi women, on the other hand, were expected to remain chaste and were closely chaperoned (Marks 1976).

Whether or not the *Mahmad* approved a specific pairing, the concept that orders Sephardi kinship and genealogical memory is the *famiya*, or kindred (*famiya* is used as singular and plural, unless plurality is unclear, in which case one uses *famiyanan*). A *famiya* is the "bilateral, extended family," consisting of "all recognized relatives on one's mother's and one's father's side, along with the kinsmen of one's spouse" (Karner 1969:11–12).

*Famiya* have been a significant factor in community social organization for more than three centuries. Until the 1964 merger, seats in the *Snoa* were assigned by *famiya*, with the *famiya* name inscribed on a plaque on the pew. A member explains that one reason for attending services in the *Snoa* is to look at the spot in which his family sat for years and to be able to imagine/remember them. His wife says she gets the same feeling at the cemetery. Another Sephardi sees his recently deceased mother and receives advice from her when the *heychal* doors are opened and the *Torah* scrolls become visible. While discussing issues of personal responsibility with one member I asked, "Your duty is to what, the community or your ancestors?" The member answered, "It's the same to me. There's no difference." For some, degree of kinship is reckoned back in time as well as throughout and among living Curaçaoan Sephardi.

Curaçao Sephardi marriage often was endogamous. Sephardi members tended to marry other Sephardi: if not someone from within their own *famiya* (often either a cross or a parallel cousin), then from another Sephardi *famiya*. This functioned to consolidate capital and to solidify the Sephardi group. It is not uncommon to find that among current married couples, when one spouse has not been raised as a Jew, she or he still possesses some degree of Jewish Sephardi (though not necessarily Curaçaoan) ancestry. Although marriages were not arranged formally, often they were arranged tacitly. The opportunities to find spouses were limited. Preserving both the name of the *famiya* and its Jewish religious affiliation were high priorities (Karner 1969:16).

Sometimes men would leave Curaçao, wed, and settle elsewhere. This contributed to the oftentimes high proportion of unwed women in the group. The offspring of these unions sometimes returned to Curaçao, occasionally marrying Curaçaoan Sephardi, reflecting the ties present even among those who left – and leave – Curaçao, and which, as in other exogamous situations, served to bring ideas, property, and genetic diversity to the Curaçaoan Sephardi.

Disapprobation of male hypogamy (marrying "down" in status by men) also served to channel Sephardi marriage patterns. Sometimes, such men were no



longer reckoned to be members of the *famiya*. An hypogamous man usually either acquired the status of his wife, or the couple emigrated from Curaçao. If he attained financial success, then he and his descendants could be reclaimed by his family of orientation as one of them (Karner 1969:15).

*Famiya* names were prized and protected by Sephardi. Not infrequently, Sephardi had double surnames. There were two general sources for this practice. One was the appropriation of *converso* history through the use of both a Christian and a Jewish surname – though when trading in places where the Inquisition was extant, sometimes only the Christian name was used. Second, reflecting the practice of bilateral kinship reckoning, on occasion Sephardi adopted the Hispanic practice of recognizing both maternal and paternal descent in one's surname (Karner 1969:17–18).

The presence of good genealogical memory aided in reckoning who one's kin were. Though most contemporary Sephardi do not know their family tree through the hundreds of years of descent on Curaçao, most do know how they are or are not related to other living Curaçaoan Sephardi. In addition, interest in genealogical relationships remains substantial. One Sephardi woman has charted the lines of descent on Curaçao for three of her kin names, including one tree with an ancestor who arrived on Curaçao in 1652. In recent generations, some *famiya* who could afford the expense commissioned family histories.

An objective discussion of Sephardi kinship also must consider their relations with Afro-Curaçaoans (Abraham 1993; Abraham-Van der Mark 1993; Allen 1992a; Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970; Karner 1969; Marks 1976; Paula 1972). Often the number of people enslaved to Sephardi was relatively small. At times this helped produce relatively intimate relations, in some aspects resembling kin relations, between Sephardi and Afro-Curaçaoans. People enslaved to Sephardi were comparatively well treated, with some egregious exceptions. People enslaved to Sephardi usually worked neither Saturday nor Sunday, many received some education, and they frequently were freed in wills. The Sephardi congregation prohibited slaves from working on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, in its by-laws; civil authorities prohibited work on Sunday. Sephardi business activities characteristically were kin-based, with out-of-wedlock Afro-Curaçaoan/Sephardi offspring and “sponsored” Afro-Curaçaoan families also included in family businesses (Karner 1969). Though reticent to identify specific people, the genealogical awareness of many Sephardi – and of many Afro-Curaçaoans – includes these out-of-wedlock connections. Finally, an additional aspect of the semi-familial relations between Sephardi and Afro-Curaçaoans is that until recent decades, childcare frequently was provided by Afro-Curaçaoan women called *yaya* (nannies). *Yaya* and their wards often formed enduring bonds.

Over the past one hundred years the decline in potential Sephardi mates, combined with increased contact with outsiders, contributed gradually to changes in marriage patterns. Cross-religion and cross-nationality marriages increased for both men and women. Currently those marriages, which constitute half the total (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970), are much more accepted. For a period after



World War II the traditional patrilocal pattern shifted to a matrilocal pattern. It since has changed back. Women now marry outsiders as much or more than men; a group of unmarried men now exists. Offspring who go for higher education in the United States might marry Americans while those who study in Holland might marry Dutch.

As exemplified by the *Yom Kippur* worship service, and in addition to kinship and religio-political organization, social gatherings were a factor in maintaining Sephardi solidarity (Karner 1969:20–22). Some gatherings were nearly obligatory for all Curaçao Sephardi into the late nineteenth century – rites of passage in particular. For example, ritual circumcisions of boys – or a “naming” for girls – held on the eighth day of a child’s life (the seventh day after birth); *b’nei mitzva* (plural of *bar mitzva*, marking the passage of 13-year-old boys into religious adulthood); weddings; and funerals were times in which almost all community members would come together. Attending funerals and weddings remains particularly important, *b’nei mitzva* slightly less so, and attending circumcisions seems somewhat less of a social obligation.

Some gatherings tended, and tend, to draw together members of multiple *famiya*, but to be less than community-wide. On “special” birthdays (birthdays, beginning at 40, that are a multiple of five), Sundays, Jewish holidays, and on the secular New Year’s Eve, December 31, members of one *famiya* visited those of other *famiya* who held open houses. Members of the same *famiya* who lived in different households often gathered together after religious services for Saturday lunches at the home of the oldest married male *famiya* member. Homes were large, and labor was cheap. Gathering together was relatively easy. There was little other entertainment. However, the forms of, and participants in, current Sephardi social interactions have been changing. Nowadays, there continue to be occasions for which many Sephardi and few others gather, but such gatherings are less frequent, draw lower, but still high percentages of Curaçao Sephardi, and will be more likely to include non-Jewish friends, non-Jewish Sephardi, and Jews who are not Sephardi. The last group, Jews who are not Sephardi, are most likely to participate in religiously oriented gatherings.

As mentioned previously, the number of children per Sephardi family has decreased. There was an average of 9 or 10 children per family in the late eighteenth century (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970); 6.2 in the generation of 1850 to 1865; 5.56 for those born 1880 to 1910; and 3.1 for 1910 to 1940. From 1940 to 1955 the average was 2.46 (Karner 1969).

I have emphasized the role of kin relations among Curaçao Sephardi, and they continue to remain significant; however, they are now less significant than in earlier centuries. *Famiya* remain at the core of Sephardi social organization, but in comparison with earlier periods, the power of that “core” to integrate multiple facets of *famiya* members’ lives has decreased. Since the mid-twentieth century, *famiya* are smaller, and family gatherings are less structured and regular. There is increased travel abroad, both for business and for pleasure, and now most children attend college abroad. This increases the likelihood that Sephardi will marry non-

Curaçaoans and settle abroad, and decreases the degree of economic nepotism. In the words of one Sephardi, "For me going to Holland meant leaving a tight, sometimes a too-tight, community and becoming anonymous.... I could do a lot of things I can't do here." Though some Sephardi return to Curaçao after living abroad, not infrequently, some continue to live outside of Curaçao. Emigration, decline in the total Curaçaoan Sephardi community, and decline in *famiya* size also affect the opportunities to enter *famiya* businesses, lessening another integrating factor of *famiya*. Though by and large continuing to maintain their Jewish identity, participation in religious activities has declined, which also has decreased the centripetal pull of *famiya* – gathering to mark ritual occasions is less significant. There are fewer potential Sephardi mates, reflected in the fact that the most recent wedding in which each spouse had four Curaçaoan Jewish Sephardi grandparents was in 1974, and in the decline in the number of people with traditional Sephardi surnames.

Due to these changing patterns, both the biological and social overlap between Sephardi *famiya* has decreased. One member of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel used the metaphor of a cluster of grapes to illustrate current congregational social relations: Each *famiya* would be represented by a grape, tied to but separate from the central stem of the congregation. Still, from the limited genealogical research in my interviews, it is possible to see that a Curaçaoan Sephardi need not go back many generations to find a kinship relation, either affinal or consanguineal, with virtually any other current Curaçaoan Sephardi. I asked one Sephardi member of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel how Sephardi stay together now that more members of both sexes work full time, often associate socially with non-Sephardi, and less frequently attend Sephardi-wide functions. The member responded that the telephone holds the community together. Brief, frequent calls keep people in touch throughout the day, even when physically separated.

Though declining, Sephardi maintain a distinct identity despite participating actively in Curaçaoan affairs. Bound together and shaped by their history prior to and on Curaçao, by their religious institutions, by economic ties, and, perhaps most importantly, by ties of kinship, Curaçaoan Sephardi have much to distinguish them from other Curaçaoans.

These conditions constitute the setting and the background for the category of Sephardi – of *hudiu* when speaking Papiamentu – on Curaçao. Without these setting and background factors – without this constellation of social behaviors – there would be no basis, and no reason for the identity, *hudiu*, to be recognized in Curaçao. A prerequisite for the existence of the term *hudiu* is the existence of a constellation of social behaviors among Curaçao Sephardi sufficiently distinctive from the social behavior of other Curaçaoans that the term *hudiu* "makes sense." However, in and of itself, this constellation of social behavior does not sufficiently explain the actual use of the category *hudiu*; it does not sufficiently explain the social practice of naming one as Sephardi on Curaçao. Indeed, the identity of Jew, for example, is not static and not equally claimed by all Sephardi. In the next chapter, in order to introduce readers to the everyday and ongoing crafting of Sephardi identity, I contrast the *hudiu* with the Ashkenazi Jews of Curaçao.



## Part II

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# Social Practice

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# Introduction

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I presented ethnic identities as reified constructions in Part I where they are described as products of historical conditions that are presumed to constitute “real” distinctions between social groups. In Part II, Chapters 8 and 9 present a different aspect of ethnic identity. It is deconstructed and reconstructed – it shifts according to local understandings about what constitute significant distinctions between social groups. However, there are also attempts to maintain historical constructions of ethnic identity in the face of changing social conditions – there are efforts to maintain the sense of stability and rootedness that unchanging understandings of ethnic identity can confer.

The social identities discussed in the three chapters in Part I progressively narrowed in focus on the identity of Curaçaoan Sephardi Jews. The focus in Part II will narrow in a different way from Chapter 8 to Chapter 9. These chapters amend the notion of social identity, expressed in Part I, as a category founded on actual events and forces, to a notion of social identity as something formed within specific, local contexts (Chapter 8) that defies unity, singularity, and continuity (Chapter 9).

The descriptive material in Chapter 8 illustrates that ethnotheories of social space – the local classifying of people into identified social groupings – draw from the foundations of local social history to produce what are (mis)understood to be fixed and unchanging ethnic identities. Chapter 9 explores the ways in which people take on ethnic identities, are given them by others, and apply them to others – an individual, but socially patterned, process that varies widely as people and situations change. This chapter presents and discusses ways in which Jews of Curaçao negotiate the social bonds of kinship, material conditions, and metaphorical understandings to invent and inscribe a localized system of ethnic identities upon groups. It does this by transcending a simple dichotomy between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Curaçaoan Jews to examine the changing ways in which people are situated, and the relationship of such continually changing social locations to ethnic identity. The factors influencing ethnic identity vary in degree and type from the relatively constant effect of ecology, to the less constant effect of colonial history, to the extremely fluid character of social interactions in everyday life – the last of these is what is explored in Chapter 9.

# Alternatively Jewish, alternatively Curaçaoan

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There are numerous ways to be Jewish and to be Curaçaoan. One may perceive oneself – or others – as more Jewish than Curaçaoan, or as more Curaçaoan than Jewish, depending on the circumstances. These alternating perceptions may change as one changes roles – whether by changing one’s task as the day progresses, or as one ages chronologically.

In Curaçao, Sephardi Jews are referred to in Papiamentu as *hudiu* (Jews) and Ashkenazi Jews as *polako* (Poles). Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews are recognized as different social groups, both among Jews and among many non-Jews – though there is not an absolute or rigid boundary between the two. That there are differences within communities of Jews in a particular locale and between communities of Jews in different locations is not unexpected, and some may consider Curaçao merely another locale with differing Jewish communities. However, Curaçao is unusual; there, the differences between *hudiu* and *polako* are significant enough to be recognized by non-Jewish Curaçaoans.

In this chapter I describe these differences to illustrate that being Jewish is not a singular, specific identity. In addition, as lived, experienced, and understood through a wide spectrum of activities, being Jewish in these differing ways results in being Curaçaoan in differing ways. Inhabiting these names – Jew, Curaçaoan – in differing, yet patterned ways illustrates that social or ethnic identities are contextual, and local constructs are subject to change.

I start the chapter by introducing readers to Curaçaoan Ashkenazi, discussing the patterns of their arrival and experience in Curaçao. Then, in keeping with the practice in this work of describing public rituals as a method of illustrating the social conditions and cultural understandings that are reflected in ritual, I discuss a holiday worship service at Congregation *Shaare Tsedek*, a predominantly Ashkenazi congregation. Finally, I contrast the images of Jewishness found among Ashkenazi and Sephardi in Curaçao, including some examples of how their differing Jewish identities result in somewhat differing Curaçaoan identities.

## Ashkenazi Jews arrive in Curaçao

The United States of America tightened its immigration quotas in 1921, and again

in 1925. The Johnson Act of 1925 limited the number of people allowed to migrate from any country to the United States to 2 per cent of the number of people from that country residing in the United States in the year 1890. In 1927, the United States restricted immigration even more by setting an overall cap of 150,000 immigrants per year from all countries (Sachar 1958:313–314).

Jews had been fleeing Russia in large numbers, mostly to the United States, since 1881. In that year, Russian nationalism – one stream of a strengthening Slavic nationalism – and its related anti-Semitism were fanned by a variety of governmental policies that restricted the areas in which Jews could settle, forced Jews from rural to urban areas, set strictly limited quotas for Jewish participation in the Russian school system, and dislodged Jews from professions and trades. Meanwhile, the recently formed nation of Rumania had begun instituting anti-Jewish governmental policies in 1866. Jews in both countries, and in differing ways elsewhere in Eastern Europe, were legislated into impoverishment, were forced to live in over-populated areas with severe economic restrictions, and were victims of physical brutality (Sachar 1958:240–260). By 1900, 40 per cent of Russian Jews were dependent on charity (Sachar 1958:246).

Such policies to eliminate Jews from Eastern Europe were well underway across the region by the 1920s, so it is no surprise that large numbers of Jews were fleeing. The lay leader of the Russian Orthodox Church and an influential figure in Russian government said the following about Jews, directly to a group of Jewish petitioners in 1898: “One third will die out, one third will leave the country, and one third will be completely dissolved in the surrounding population” (Sachar 1958:246). The success of these genocidal and relocation policies can be judged from some of the following results. Between 1880 and 1933, about four million Eastern European Jews moved westward, primarily to the United States, but also to Western Europe, including France, Belgium, and Germany. In 1880, 75 per cent of all Jews in the world lived in Eastern Europe; by 1933 that number was only 46 per cent. One-quarter of an entire people had re-located under duress. In 1880, 3.5 per cent of all Jews lived in North and South America; in 1933, 30 per cent lived in the Americas (Sachar 1958:314–315).

The Ashkenazi Jews of Curaçao were a later part of this migration. Figures from before and after the Johnson Act of 1925 illustrate the change produced by the Act. From 1901 through 1925, 1,823,000 Jews moved to the United States and Canada. During the same period, 19,000 moved to other countries in the Americas, excluding Argentina and Brazil. From 1926 through 1939 only 173,000 Jews migrated to the United States and Canada, while 58,000 immigrated to elsewhere in the Americas, not counting those who migrated to Argentina and Brazil (Sachar 1958:314).

The reconfiguration of national boundaries in Europe after World War I and the Russian revolution altered the specifics of governmental anti-Jewish policies in Eastern Europe, but persecution of Jews persisted during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in Poland, Rumania, and Hungary (Sachar 1958:348–368). Most of the Ashkenazi who arrived in Curaçao between 1925 and the onset of World War



It came from an area in Eastern Europe called Bessarabia (Abraham 1991) that straddles the border between Rumania and the Ukraine, between the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea.

The flight of Jews from Eastern Europe also was spurred by technological advances (e.g., the increasing availability of passage by ship) and the spread of ideas. Zionist and socialist ideologies helped to draw Jews away from traditional religious practice and small-town life. Enlightenment ideologies that affirmed individualism and human rights inspired the “huddled masses, yearning to breathe free” (from “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, on the Statue of Liberty). Ashkenazi Jews not only fled from the east, they were drawn westward. When unable to settle in the United States, some settled in South or Central America, and some made homes on Curaçao.

Because of its need for laborers at the time, the oil refinery on Curaçao (see Chapter 5) was partially responsible for drawing Ashkenazi Jews to Curaçao from the mid-1920s until the late 1930s. As one Ashkenazi in Curaçao relates: “When the ships stopped in Curaçao on the way to other ports, they [Ashkenazi Jews] heard there was work at the refinery and got off. Some of them had been trained as engineers in Europe, but were not allowed to work, due to their religion.” Another person explained: “*Waar olie is moet geld zijn*” (Where there is oil there must be money) (Abraham 1991:32).

The prior existence of a community of Sephardi Jews on Curaçao was a second inducement to settle there; yet, it did not produce a smooth encounter between the two Jewish groups. Only a minority of Ashkenazi were from Poland. Yet, the lower status and lesser wealth of the Eastern European Jews relative to the Sephardi were reflected in the appellation of the term *polako* to the Ashkenazi. Its use carried a strong negative connotation (Abraham 1991) which some current Curaçaoan Ashkenazi remember bitterly and which some Sephardi regret deeply. Some Sephardi and some Ashkenazi of Curaçao remain sensitive about the use of the term *polako*.<sup>1</sup>

As these original Curaçaoan Ashkenazi, mostly young men, established themselves, they usually sent for other family members and they helped in the settlement of other immigrating Ashkenazi, including non-kin – especially when the immigrant came from the same region as the Curaçao resident (Abraham 1991). Eventually, the Ashkenazi who settled in Curaçao founded their own congregation, *Shaare Tsedek*<sup>2</sup> or Gates of Righteousness.

The Ashkenazi who came to Curaçao arrived with few economic resources, but many had some background in retailing and most – coming from Eastern European border areas – were used to dealing with ethnic groups different than themselves (Abraham 1991). Many Ashkenazi at first subsisted by buying goods from Sephardi wholesalers and then peddling them throughout the rural areas of Curaçao. In doing so they introduced two significant changes to the Curaçaoan economy. They separated retailing from wholesaling, and they allowed customers to pay for goods in installments (Abraham 1991). These practices were profitable in a Curaçaoan economy that, due to the refinery, had a growing number of laborers with money to

spend and who, more than before, were participating in the cash – rather than the barter – economy.

With low taxes and little competition during the first two to three decades of Ashkenazi settlement, they were able to prosper – even during the economic depression of the 1930s. Although starting with very little, Ashkenazi businesses often became profitable. For example, one man reports filling his shoe store with boxes (though most of the boxes in his store were empty) in order to appear to have a lot of stock, and that he slept upstairs to keep the store open day and night (Abraham 1991:33). The innovations described above enabled Ashkenazi to change the way goods were distributed to customers. Some Ashkenazi began by carrying goods on their backs and transporting them by foot. Some then hired young Afro-Curaçaoan males to carry the goods. Later, some transported goods by using carts – first, without a mule, then with a mule. Finally they stopped peddling altogether, selling first out of small stores on back streets and then in larger stores on major streets (Abraham 1991).

Economic prosperity meant that the Ashkenazi could become economically independent from the Sephardi. They began to import goods directly, bypassing Sephardi wholesalers. As sellers of goods and as employers, Ashkenazi became increasingly visible to the general Curaçaoan population. As such, some were targets of the May 30th riots in 1969 (see Chapter 5). Afterward, shaken by the riots, some Ashkenazi left Curaçao (Abraham 1991). However, the relatively visible power of Ashkenazi Jews in the Curaçaoan politico-economic system is and was less than it might appear. Ashkenazi are not without influence, but there are stronger centers of power in Curaçao, such as political parties, banks, the Dutch government, and, for the past two decades, the labor unions. The Curaçaoan economic recession of the early to mid-1980s that followed the devaluation of the Venezuelan bolivar (see Chapter 5), led to a further exodus of Ashkenazi from Curaçao. Many children had not returned to manage businesses, and some of their older parents took the recession as an opportunity to close or sell their businesses and retire, sometimes moving to another country, usually the United States (Abraham 1991).

The president of Congregation Shaare Tsedek reported that the congregation numbered 49 member households in 1989, down from over 100 member households in the late 1960s (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:496). Karner (1969:68) reports over 450 Curaçao Ashkenazi in 1968, while Grossman (1977:7) reports that there were 335 total members in 1973.

Not including minor children and adult children living off the island, I counted 105 members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek at the time of my fieldwork. This figure includes several Sephardi from Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel with dual memberships, several North African Sephardi who recently immigrated to Curaçao, and spouses who have arrived during the last three decades – largely from North America, South America, and Israel, or who are from Curaçao and may have converted to Judaism. Together with the members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (see Chapter 6), this includes virtually all Jewish residents of

Curaçao. The prevailing opinion among Curaçao Ashkenazi and Sephardi is that very few Jewish residents of Curaçao are not affiliated with one congregation or the other.

At first, Sephardi cooperated economically with Ashkenazi, but it was not long before differing positions in the economic structure led to tensions between the two groups. Contact revealed that Curaçaoan Sephardi and Curaçaoan Ashkenazi differed from one another in many ways. At the time of the arrival of Ashkenazi Jews in Curaçao, the Ashkenazi and Sephardi differed significantly in language, informal and ritual religious practice, dress, and much more. Below I discuss differences in religious practice.

### **Alternative Jewish prayer, the Curaçao Ashkenazi service**

Upon their arrival in Curaçao, Ashkenazi Jews were allowed to pray in the *Snoa* but not allowed to join. As one Sephardi comments: “Before the War [World War II], only Sephardis could join Sephardi synagogues. Since there were so few of us, it was easy to check the records in the Netherlands.” The situation since that time has changed due to the Holocaust associated with World War II, the merger of Congregation Mikvé Israel with Temple Emanu-El, and the decline in number of the Ashkenazi and Sephardi populations of Curaçao. In addition, for approximately the past fifteen years, Congregation Shaare Tsedek did not have a rabbi, while Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel did. These factors, and the smaller size of Congregation Shaare Tsedek’s sanctuary, meant that many *b’nei mitzvah* of members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek were celebrated in the *Snoa*. Most members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek who have children approaching the age of *bar* or *bat mitzvah* – boys at 13 and girls at 12 – now join Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel one year before their *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is to be celebrated. Then, if their children have attended the joint Hebrew School – a school for Hebrew and for Jewish religious instruction – two afternoons a week for one hour for six years, services in the *Snoa* for a year, and prepared for the ceremony, they are entitled to celebrate the *bar* or *bat mitzvah* in the *Snoa*. On the other hand, relatively few members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel transfer their membership to Congregation Shaare Tsedek, and few join Shaare Tsedek as a second membership.

The worship experience at Congregation Shaare Tsedek differs significantly from that at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. Services at Congregation Shaare Tsedek are held each Friday evening and Saturday morning. During my fieldwork, the Friday evening service began at 7:00 p.m. and the Saturday morning service began at 7:00 a.m. Services ordinarily lasted about one-half hour on Fridays and one to one-and-one-half hours on Saturdays. In contrast with Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, the Friday starting time allowed worshipers to go home after work to wash and arrange joint transportation to the synagogue. The Saturday schedule enabled worshipers to complete their prayers in time to open their stores by the

usual beginning of business hours. Friday evening services at Congregation Shaare Tsedek usually were shorter than those at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel because there was no sermon. During my fieldwork a few members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek began holding the traditional Saturday evening service called *Havdala* (Differentiating) that marks the end of the Jewish Sabbath and the beginning of the secular week.

In the mid-1980s Congregation Shaare Tsedek sold the synagogue building it had consecrated in 1959 (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:498). The former synagogue had been located near the center of Willemstad, near *Punda*, in a once prestigious area, *Scharloo* (see Pruneti Winkel 1987), that had begun to deteriorate. Along with Sephardi and other middle-class Curaçaoans, more and more Ashkenazi were moving east from *Punda* to newly built suburban areas adjacent to it. The current synagogue of Congregation Shaare Tsedek is located in one such area, *Mahaai*, in a building originally erected as a single-family residence. The new synagogue is closer to most members' homes and can be maintained at lower cost. The small sanctuary contributes to a feeling of comfort, informality, and friendliness. This, however, also is a problem because the sanctuary does not have enough seats for heavily attended religious rituals, such as *b'nei mitzvah* or major holidays. The current air-conditioned sanctuary is in the former L-shaped living room of the house, with the pulpit (*bima*) and the ark (*aron ha'kodesh*) – different terms than those used in the *Snoa* – located at the nexus of the two legs of the L. The furnishings in the sanctuary are adequate for sacred rituals, but tend not to inspire awe for many members. Seating is in rows of fold-down wooden chairs, separated by armrests, and bolted to the floor. Along one wall of the shorter side of the L, the men's side, is a metal plaque with the names of members who have died. Both congregations, in differing ways, memorialize their ancestors within the synagogue setting.

Women sit in the somewhat longer leg of the L. The Ashkenazi conform to the Jewish tradition of separating men from women during religious services. However, the separation of the two sexes at Shaare Tsedek is not a rigid affair. Women and men are visible to each other, individual men or women sometimes walk through the area of the other, and the overflow area – located in the space between the two legs – that occasionally is used for major holidays tends to be used jointly by both women and men.

Attendance at Congregation Shaare Tsedek seemed to be increasing during the time of my research. There was a growing involvement of a young cadre of members, including some recent immigrants to Curaçao who originally came from Morocco. Although Sephardi, these young adults preferred the more traditionally Jewish (i.e., religiously observant) services and customs of Congregation Shaare Tsedek. Also, the Board of Directors of Congregation Shaare Tsedek changed completely during my fieldwork. A group of younger men – from about 25 to about 40 years old – ran as a slate and won overwhelmingly, defeating a group of men who tended to be over 60 years old, most of whom had managed the congregation for over a decade. There was a good deal of excitement among members and little

rancor, however, surrounding this election. Part of the congeniality of the transfer of authority was because some members of the old and new Boards remained within the same families: a nephew replaced an uncle, a son-in-law replaced a father-in-law, and a nephew by marriage replaced an uncle by marriage. Moreover, two goals of the new Board, to hire a rabbi and to construct their own synagogue building, were accepted widely. These two goals, it was thought, would help to maintain and enhance their autonomy from Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, thus addressing the desires of a number of members. Having their own rabbi would reduce the impulse to join Mikvé Israel-Emanuel for a *bar mitzvah*; the hoped-for increase in attendance expected to be the result of these changes would help to maintain the distinctive practices of the Congregation Shaare Tsedek service; and these changes would enable the Ashkenazi to avoid praying with people who decades earlier, among other things, had not allowed them to become members of the Sephardi congregation. By the end of my fieldwork, Congregation Shaare Tsedek had hired a rabbi, but constructing a new synagogue building was a much more daunting task – one that would be difficult to achieve.

Generally, only men attend the weekly Friday and Saturday services – and, if there are no women present, men sit anywhere in the sanctuary. The tenor of these services felt to me like a kind of “men’s club.” Two younger members referred to it as a “market.” Men sitting near one another often chatted. Their comments were full of quips, personal news, business, politics, and more. Conversation could be in any of six languages (Yiddish, Dutch, English, Papiamentu, Spanish, or Hebrew), but announcements were in English. Occasionally, someone would be disturbed by the level of small talk and call out a short “shush” or “*sheket*” (quiet, in Hebrew). If the person disturbed was at the pulpit, he might rap on its wooden surface.

Style of prayer further differentiated the tenor of Congregation Shaare Tsedek from Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. In Congregation Shaare Tsedek virtually all prayers were in Hebrew – there was almost no English prayer – and page numbers rarely were announced. Most prayers were read or mumbled individually. The leader of the service (when there was no rabbi, one of several congregational members) chanted the concluding words of selected paragraphs and immediately called out the initial word or phrase of the succeeding paragraph. This traditional style of worship serves to keep progression through the service cohesive despite variations in the speed with which worshipers read the prayers. One could choose to read as much or as little as one wished. Some men read almost all of the prayers, at times seeming to enter into a kind of trance, while others talked more than prayed. Most prayers were read sitting down, but a few required members of the congregation to stand. If a prayer that required standing was only one or two sentences long, sometimes a worshiper would only half rise out of his chair; on the other hand, some men would stand – or even walk around for extended periods of time – for prayers that did not require one to stand. Periodically a prayer would be sung, usually with gusto, and often not in key. Unlike Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, Congregation Shaare Tsedek uses neither choir nor organ.

Members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek tend to call their congregation either

Orthodox or Traditional; however, it seems reasonable to describe it as a Conservative congregation – in the mold of the American Jewish Conservative Movement – as well. Some members follow the Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*), but most do not. Some who do not keep *kosher* during the year maintain the special dietary laws for the eight-day holiday of Passover. Most members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek are willing to travel or work on Saturdays, activities that traditionally are restricted by observant Jews. Yet, many members affirm their Jewish identity through personal ownership of Jewish ritual objects. Members commonly possess their own head coverings (*kipa* or *yarmulke*) and prayer shawls (*tallit*) – traditional religious artifacts used when worshiping, bringing the objects with them when they go to the synagogue. Some members know the prayers by rote, they have heard them so many times, and do not need to read from the prayer book. Some of the older members, and a few recent immigrants, are fluent in Hebrew, while the fluency of those raised on Curaçao is lower.

To further illustrate the experience of worship at Congregation Shaare Tsedek, and to convey a sense of how Ashkenazi Curaçaoan culture differs from Sephardi Curaçaoan culture, I combine extracts from my fieldnotes about the two *Simchat Torah* (literally, Joy of the Torah; sometimes translated as “Rejoicing in the Law”) services I attended at Congregation Shaare Tsedek in 1991 and 1992.

### ***Simchat Torah* at Congregation Shaare Tsedek**

*Simchat Torah* is a holiday that falls on the twenty-second or twenty-third day of the Jewish Year – after the seven-day festival of *Sukkot* (Booths), which commemorates the biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt, and almost two weeks after *Yom Kippur*.<sup>3</sup> Usually it falls in the month of September or October. I was able to attend these services without missing *Simchat Torah* at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (see Chapter 2) because – unlike Congregation Shaare Tsedek – the Sephardi congregation observes *Simchat Torah* on the earlier day.

*Simchat Torah* is a joyous holiday, celebrating the reception of the *Torah* from God. On that day, the last words of the *Torah* are read in the service immediately followed by the first words. Among other things, this confirms the eternal cycling and never-ending role of the *Torah* in traditional Jewish life. A traditional *Simchat Torah* service includes seven *hakafot* (encirclings), in which multiple *Torah* scrolls are carried around the sanctuary. To show their devotion to the *Torah* and possibly to “ingest” its sacredness symbolically, worshipers “kiss” the scrolls as they pass by. However, it is taboo to kiss the scrolls directly. Instead, one touches the fabric covering the scroll, usually with one’s fingers, a prayer book, or a prayer shawl, then lightly kisses the mediating object.

It would seem that to compare a *Simchat Torah* service in one congregation with a *Yom Kippur* service – a holiday with a very different purpose – in another congregation (see Chapter 6) would be pointless. However, in the tradition of Weber (1958), I would argue that religious rituals confirm and reflect, maintain and transmit the understandings and experience shared by those in a group (see

Stromberg 1986). Thus, “painting a picture” of those rituals – “translating” them here for readers of this document – can help convey to outsiders, to “others,” a sense of the understandings and experiences shared within that social group. That a *Simchat Torah* service always will differ from a *Yom Kippur* service does not matter. The way in which Congregation Shaare Tsedek celebrates *Simchat Torah* reflects Curaçao Ashkenazi life, and the same is true for Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, *Yom Kippur*, and Curaçao Sephardi life – at least according to my experience among them.

From my fieldnotes:

At each of the *Simchat Torah* services at Congregation Shaare Tsedek there were about 75 to 100 people present. In many ways the services were similar to those at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, but there was a quality to the gathering that was much different.

People moved about, talked, and the *Torah* scrolls were carried around the women’s section, but not the men’s – there was not enough room to do it on the men’s side because there is no aisle behind the men’s seats. People seemed to be excited by the whole thing and to be having a good time. Most, not all, of the older men wore coats and ties, and the majority, though not all, of the middle-aged and young men wore neither coat nor tie.

[The number of *Torah* scrolls possessed by a particular congregation determines the number of participants in each *hakafah* (singular for *hakafot*).] Being chosen for the honor of carrying a *Torah* during the *hakafot* was done informally; people stood around in front and one person called up men for the honor – but without making a big formal announcement. Once everyone was matched with a *Torah*, the men just took off individually for their turn around the sanctuary. It seemed as if the ritual was unorchestrated, belonging to the participants. The leader quickly said the appropriate prayer for each *hakafah*. Actually he almost mumbled it, and it was almost impossible to hear or to know that it was being recited. Congregation members did not pretend to say the prayer.

Then, in 1991, someone would turn on a tape with Israeli folksongs. In a way the tape was atrocious, because it kept jumping from one song to another; but people knew the songs and enjoyed singing them. Almost everyone who was passed by a *Torah* kissed it every time it passed. In 1992 there was no tape played during the *hakafot*. People sang, though, especially the women. They had passed out song sheets in transliteration [in which Hebrew words are written in an English-language orthography], and those were sung and clapped to throughout. Although the women sang the folksongs – e.g., “*Hava Nagilah*” (Come Let Us Exult), “*Am Yisrael Chai*” (The Nation/People of Israel Lives), “*David Melech Yisrael*” (David, King of Israel), etc. – louder than the men during the *hakafot*, when prayers were sung – e.g., “*Aleinu*” (Let Us Rise), “*Etz Chaim He*” (She is a Tree of Life), “*Adon Olam*” (Lord of the World), etc. – the men sang out loudly, and the women were relatively quiet.



It was hard to tell when one *hakafah* ended and another one began. The men got separated from each other as they went around the sanctuary, and traded off on their own when they returned to the *bima* to whoever wished to carry a scroll next. Also, there did not seem always to be a waiting period to collect all the men carrying *Torah* scrolls together in order to begin the succeeding *hakafah* in unison – although that was not always the case.

The women really seemed to get excited by the whole thing. They sang, they kissed the scrolls, and they greeted me as I went around among them with a scroll. In 1992 it was a wonderful feeling for me. Virtually every woman reached out to kiss my *Torah* as I passed. I made sure to slow down so that everyone could reach it. I “danced” a bit with it, as did a number of other men. Then, as I passed women I knew better, they “pounced” on me with a blessing in Yiddish and bright, excited smiles – along with kisses for the *Torah*, and caresses for me. I felt that I was being received and blessed by loving hands. The women not only kissed the *Torah*, they also kissed the men. They showed a lot of love and good feeling. Only one woman kissed me, but several more seemed as if they wanted to, yet were not sure whether to do so with me. The warmth expressed toward me personally was much stronger than what I felt last year. This time, people really knew me better, and it showed [see discussion of participant-observation in Chapter 2].

In comparison with the formal, grand character of services in Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, the style of worship at Congregation Shaare Tsedek is informal. Each person participates in the worship service in a more personal manner. For example, one may worship exuberantly, meditatively, or casually. The worshipers determine much about the quality of their worship experience. One chooses whether, and to what degree, to attend to the ritual. Attaining a transcendent experience during worship depends largely on individual action. Though coordinated, each worshiper at Congregation Shaare Tsedek performs religious ritual in accordance with individual inclinations. This is in contrast to a worship style at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel in which (though, of course, individual choice and attentiveness are factors in the quality of the worship experience, too) much of the religious ritual is performed by a few who conduct the service; congregants participate by listening, observing, and responding to direction in a coordinated manner.

## Two images of being Jewish on Curaçao

Ashkenazi and Sephardi share some aspects of Curaçaoan Jewish life. At least three couples currently living on Curaçao include an Ashkenazi and a Sephardi spouse. In addition, the two congregations jointly operate a Hebrew school for children; and members of the two congregations come together in a Jewish men’s civic group, *B’nai B’rith* (literally, Sons of the Covenant), a Jewish high-school-age youth group, *B’nai B’rith Youth Organization* (BBYO), and the Women’s International



Zionist Organization (WIZO) – a women’s group to support Israel. The adult groups, however, have few activities, and these are attended sparsely. Ashkenazi and Sephardi ways of life, including both religious traditions and a variety of secular practices, differ considerably.

During contract negotiations I asked a person who participates in activities at both congregations to explain why one Curaçaoan Jewish congregation wanted me to sign a contract while the other did not. The following fieldnote describes that person’s comments about differences in the way that the Boards of the two Jewish congregations on Curaçao would behave toward me if I displeased them:

The Board of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel does everything with great formality including, for example, the decorum of its service and the procedure of a legal contract to regulate its relations with you [i.e., with me, the fieldworker]. [My narrator continues,] if things go wrong between Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and you, the Board will not speak badly about you, they simply will cut you out; they will not speak of you at all.

[My narrator continues,] the Board of Congregation Shaare Tsedek, on the other hand – in keeping with the informality of its service – has welcomed you as a fellow Jew with no reservations. They say, you are a Jew and you want to study the community here; that is great. However, [my narrator claims,] if you do things to displease the Board of Congregation Shaare Tsedek, then they will bad mouth you “in three languages” to everyone they know! Even the young children [as this person put it] will tell everyone about the bad things you did.

I repeat these comments neither to denigrate nor to praise either congregation, but to reproduce a local analysis of cultural understandings that differentiate, sometimes sharply, one congregation from the other. Here the (mis)understood differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi lie in perceived norms of behavior. Though both congregations are “Jewish,” in many ways they are dissimilar.

These dissimilarities derive from lived socio-cultural differences. In response to a question in my second interview (Appendix 3, number 79) – Is religion, to you, a matter of tradition, ethics, social relations, or something else? – virtually no one considered religion to be “a matter of ... social relations.” Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi interviewees thought that religion, for example, was a matter of “conviction,” a realm in which ethical behavior was taught, or that it consisted of important traditions that were transmitted from one generation to the next. However, that their lives manifested differing images of Jewishness – corresponding with differing histories – indicates that being a Jew has much to do with one’s social relations. It indicates that religion is, among other things, a social activity – a reflection of social practices, kinship, politico-economic relations, and social history.

In addition to being a time to connect with things divine, worship is a time to connect with others in one’s social group. At Congregation Shaare Tsedek, the worship service produces social cohesion through multiple individual contacts

within a relaxed ritual framework that can accommodate varying styles. This may reflect, in part, the history of Ashkenazi immigration to Curaçao. Though minimally interconnected prior to settling on Curaçao, the Ashkenazi members of Shaare Tsedek – later joined by others, such as Jews from Morocco – developed a community out of their similarities. They coalesced due to similar experiences prior to immigration and upon arrival in Curaçao, and due to their shared identity as Jews. Family is important among Ashkenazi as well as among Sephardi – indeed, members of Ashkenazi extended families operate businesses together and spend a great deal of leisure time together. However, on Curaçao, Ashkenazi extended families are less interconnected than the Portuguese Sephardi extended families. Most members of the Ashkenazi community seem to experience their ethnic identity as Jews first, then as Curaçaoans. As individual Jews who have made the choice to live on this island, they seem to experience relatively less obligation than Curaçaoan Sephardi to conform to the wishes of a central, religio-political authority.

On the other hand, the service at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (a community with multiplex ties of kinship and subsistence that extend back for generations) is in keeping with a congregation with both a tradition of a centralizing religio-political authority and a strong sense of itself as a unique entity. After services, every member present most likely will try to greet every other member of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel with a quick handshake or kiss to the cheek(s). As I described the atmosphere at the *Snoa* prior to and after a *Kol Nidre* service in a fieldnote:

People were in a good mood before and after, smiling and greeting everyone else who was there. There seemed almost a “requirement” to greet everyone else. That’s a bad word for it. I should just say that people were glad to see everyone else and seemed to revel in the opportunity to greet so many friends at one time. Some of that wore off on me. I received many warm greetings and an invitation to break the fast.

Chatting may come later, but worshipers first make brief contact with as many others as possible. They try to greet every single member present and not to miss or slight anyone (compare with discussion of *aña nobo* in Chapter 9). Such greeting practices seem to (re)affirm their connectedness, and are found after weekly Shabbat services as well as after *Kol Nidre*.

Thus, both congregations confirm their social grouped-ness at the site of their religious services – though the degree to which the religious service itself is effective in promoting group integration may be debated. Differences in the style in which this is accomplished can be associated with differing social histories. Curaçao Sephardi have existed as a bounded, delimited group for over three hundred years. As a non-Jewish Curaçaoan Sephardi says: “My people are the Jews, my religion is irrelevant.” By “Jews,” this person refers to the *hudiin*, the Curaçaoan Sephardi, in particular – including those not Jewish by religion. Curaçao

Ashkenazi, on the other hand, see themselves less as a bounded group defined by their relation to Curaçao, and more as a subgroup within the larger group of Ashkenazi Jews. For example, in response to another question in my second interview (Appendix 3, number 59) – Are there any group(s) from which you would not want someone to marry into your family? – an Ashkenazi interviewee said: “They would just have to be Jewish, nothing else matters.”

Another area of difference is in the division of gender roles in religious ritual. Although many adult women of both Jewish congregations were working in jobs outside of the home during my fieldwork, men are more active than women in the public rituals of worship as practiced by contemporary Curaçaoan Ashkenazi. The Curaçao Sephardi who descend from members of Temple Emanu-El, however, come from a Reform Jewish tradition of approximately 130 years in which men and women sat together in religious services, and in which women were somewhat incorporated into public worship. Traditional Jews around the world – whether Ashkenazi or Sephardi – tend to regard the religious obligations of women as chiefly involved with rituals that occur in the household, they do not count women in the quorum (*minyan*) of ten men aged at least 13 required by traditional Judaism for religious services. Congregation Shaare Tsedek did not count women when determining whether the quorum for services had been met; Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel does count women in its *minyan*, though for several years there has been dissent within it over the role of women in its service. Most members want women to be allowed to perform many religious functions, yet some strongly oppose widening the role that women have in rituals occurring in the *Snoa*.

During the two to three generations of its existence, many of the members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek had to work long hours to support themselves. Though the number of wealthy members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel is limited, worshipers at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel live in a style that may be characterized as gracious and having the appearance of ease. Though members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel appear at ease and comfortable in the *Snoa* – a place in which many grew up – joking or lengthy conversations would be considered out of place at a service; however, demonstrating graciousness by greeting the other women and men present would not. Limited attendance, though, prevents the *Snoa* from functioning as a regular meeting place for Sephardi. The *Snoa* is not a place where members of the community can keep up with each other, trade information, and maintain friendships, except on a limited scale.

On the other hand, though many members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek now are prosperous, they come from a recent history of economic struggle and from a religious tradition that tends to support the public performance, by men, of individual religious experience. Services at this congregation provide a regular opportunity for men who face similar challenges to support one another. Practice at both congregations reflects and supports members’ understandings of who they are and the necessarily related “readings” of their social histories.

In addition to attitudes and to religious behavior, Ashkenazi and Sephardi differ

in a variety of other behaviors. For example, remembering that the following are patterns, and not applicable to every person in each community, in Ashkenazi homes, the language spoken within the household usually will be English, Yiddish, or Spanish, while Sephardi often speak Papiamentu among themselves; in Ashkenazi homes a Christmas tree would be an anathema – a symbol of one’s persecutors, while in not a few Sephardi homes a Christmas tree is a pretty object or a symbol of “universal good will”; and in their respective folklores, Ashkenazi protect themselves from the evil eye using the color red, while Sephardi use blue. In regard to some other behaviors often associated with a Curaçaoan identity, Ashkenazi are less likely, for example, to employ Curaçaoan herbal remedies, use *sénsia*, eat *tutu*, and go to *truk’i pan* than are Sephardi (see Appendix 3, question numbers 37, 27, 34, and 31) – though one’s generation and age are important variables in these behaviors, as well. Finally, Ashkenazi are more likely to have lived in Israel for a period of time than Sephardi, or to have married an Israeli. In each of these distinctions, Sephardi practices more closely conform to non-Jewish Curaçaoan practices and reflect a widespread understanding that Sephardi are deeply Curaçaoan while Ashkenazi are less so. This distinction has a certain verisimilitude, and it helps those involved maintain certain social categories. Yet, as we have seen when discussing language and labor in Chapter 5 and as we will see in Chapter 9, its accuracy is limited.

Nevertheless, Ashkenazi appear to identify themselves more as Jews than as Curaçaoans, while Sephardi appear to emphasize more strongly their Curaçao-ness without denying their Jewishness. A Jew with affiliations in both congregations said: “The Sephardi feel they are Curaçaoan first and Jewish after. They don’t feel the *yiddishkeit* [Jewishness; especially as far as the traditions, religious and secular, of East European Jews] of the Ashkenazi.”

Two rather inflammatory quotes I heard during fieldwork tend to support this comparison. Though they may not represent the feelings of the majority of the two communities, the quotes are presented to illustrate distinctions. First, a member of the Ashkenazi community, upon learning that I was studying the Sephardi, commented in Hebrew: “They have a past, but they have no future!” (*Yeish l’hem avar, aval ain l’hem atid*). This person’s statement stands as an ironic and probably unintentional counter to the dedication in a book put out by Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel on the history of the *Snoa* (Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel 1982): “A people without a past, has no future.” Perhaps foolishly, I reported this to a member of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. I explained that I was interested in how the two Jewish communities are alike and unlike. After some angry words, the member calmed down and responded: “We’re completely different. We both happen to be called Jews, but we have nothing in common.” Members of both congregations are aware of their pasts and concerned for their futures, but the images of their pasts and futures differ. The Ashkenazi, recently liberated from the persecution of Eastern Europe, rely on the thousands of years of Jewish history in the face of oppression to predict the continued future of the Jewish people on this earth. The Sephardi, aware of the history of their particular community and known

kin on Curaçao – along with feelings of pride about the achievements of Sephardi Jews in Spain – are less certain of their future. When Ashkenazi imagine the future they are likely to be referring to the future of all Jews worldwide. The Sephardi imagination of the future often refers to a much smaller group, to the Western, Portuguese Sephardi with ties to Curaçao. The number of Sephardi living in Curaçao is declining, making it difficult to maintain the *Snoa* and Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. In addition, though the number of Ashkenazi living on Curaçao is declining as well, the Ashkenazi sense of history is comparatively less tied to Curaçao than is the Sephardi sense of history.

In the next chapter, I further discuss ways in which ethnic identity among Curaçaoan Jews shifts, and is subject to negotiation. I describe further ways in which single, unitary, and unchanging notions of ethnic identity are problematic.

# Ascribing identities

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Identities are conferred and claimed through social action. An identity is an act rather than an essence; it is a verb rather than a noun. Several themes about ethnic identity are tied together in this chapter, which also includes a discussion of the importance of kinship in ethnic identity, and ethnic identity as “nodes” in social space to which people attach themselves and others. Kinship often is at the center of ethnic identity, helping to produce the experience of a “node,” a center around which a social grouping coalesces. As I use the term, nodes of ethnic identity are particular to a geographic region (in this case the island of Curaçao), forming a localized pattern of social groupings. In addition, nodes of ethnic identity are ill-bounded and shifting.

After a discussion of kinship and ethnic identity in Curaçao that draws on the holiday of *aña nobo* for illustration, the chapter continues with an examination of ethnic identity as a “node” in social space. Then, I complicate the discussion of nodes by illustrating their inconstancy, and conclude with a return to the Curaçaoan “Romeo and Juliet” couple discussed earlier to illustrate further the local character of ethnic identity.

## Kinship and ethnic identity

It is instructive at this point to return for a moment to *Romeo and Juliet*, the play discussed in Chapter 1. In this play, the two opposing social groups essentially are extended kin groupings. The Capulets are one family and the Montagues are another. In comparing the notion of kinship with the notion of ethnicity, one sees that ethnicity often rests on metaphors of kinship; yet, ethnic identity usually is expected to refer to a social group that transcends observable kinship. Members of ethnic groups may be conceived of as related “by blood,” but this conceptualization – at times this ideology – is not meant to indicate that each member of one’s ethnic group is a member of one’s family in more than a metaphorical sense.

In Curaçao, indeed, ties of kinship connect Sephardi-Jewish households with each other, and Ashkenazi-Jewish households with one another. Though few, there are ties of kinship between Ashkenazi and Sephardi households. A holiday

that affirms the centrality of kinship in structuring Curaçaoan social organization is *aña nobo*.

### ***Aña nobo***

*Aña nobo*, a widely celebrated annual holiday on Curaçao, is the secular or calendar New Year, falling on December 31. The holiday is considered to be a joyous time, a time for introspection, potential danger, and renewal. One set of practices that express hope for renewal and good fortune is a variety of activities understood to drive out *fukú* (negative forces, or bad luck). Incense (*sénsia*) is burned and carried into each corner of every room in a residence to purify the house; foods that are interpreted as representing health and monetary success are ingested; and long strings of firecrackers, *bolo* (literally, cakes, because they are wrapped into a shape resembling a cake) are ignited – particularly at midnight – in order to prevent *fukú* from entering one's home or one's soul at, metaphorically speaking, that crack in time when the world is newly reborn and vulnerable.

Unlike *karnaval*, which many Jews experience as little more than a big party, many Sephardi and Ashkenazi experience *aña nobo* as a meaningful ritual. Many Jews – though Sephardi more often than Ashkenazi – perform rituals against *fukú*; however, the number who do so with conviction is few and declining. The *aña nobo* rituals, instead, for many are familiar and fun, evoking memories of childhood and of years past. Sometimes the application of *sénsia* is performed in a business, sometimes out of conviction, and sometimes – I was told – in order to satisfy the wishes of one's employees.

Businesses play a part in New Year celebrations as well. Often a business will host a large gathering, with food, drink, and *bolo*, during the day of the 31st. People maneuver to attend large parties with lavish spreads, and those who host such parties expect certain others – friends, politicians, suppliers, customers, and kin – to attend. Varying elements of the island social system come together at *aña nobo* as at no other time during the year. The people who matter to a business operation – which, after all, is at the heart of its own social network – reaffirm by their presence that their activities meaningfully connect them with each other in ways that transcend subsistence needs.

By mid-evening, however, such parties are over and what is often the most personally meaningful stage of *aña nobo* begins. At that time people gather, by and large, in family clusters at private homes. The groupings usually are composed of more than nuclear families, but are limited extended families. The extended kin who are closest gather together. Dress is casual, and relatively light food is served. Often people sit outside – in itself a common behavior, but at this season and time of evening the weather often is particularly pleasant. They usher in the New Year with quiet conversation and few distractions.

At the stroke of midnight – or close to it – *bolo* are lit throughout the island. For fifteen or twenty minutes machine-gun-like popping sounds are heard from all directions and the streets are completely blocked by strings of firecrackers lain one

after another in front of people's homes. The noise is so loud that many people cover their ears. One person told me an anecdote that in a previous year someone had over-flown Curaçao in a small plane at midnight. The smoke from the *bolo* reportedly was so dense that it was impossible to see the island from above. The image of the island being hidden completely due to the extensiveness of the celebration was satisfying somehow. It seemed to demonstrate the wide participation in *aña nobo* celebrations by all Curaçaoans, reflected by the transformation of the island's very atmosphere, and to indicate that *fukú* would be thoroughly cleansed from the island. Here, again, *aña nobo* functions as a Curaçaoan rite of intensification, reinforcing among Curaçaoans a sense of shared experience and understandings, but it serves other functions as well.

People often drink a glass of champagne while they stand in front of their homes and watch the *bolo* explode. Also, each person at the household will greet all others present, often saying, *tur kos bon* (all the best) or *bon aña* (have a good year), or both. Many people report that these greetings are solemn, heartfelt expressions of love and caring, in which personal wishes for the other, and brief, sympathetic reviews of the past year are conveyed. Some people report these greetings to be exuberant and happy, with little note of cares or concerns. In either case, people make an important contact with one another; deep, familial ties are reaffirmed piercingly amidst noise and smoke, and lubricated by champagne, food, and a spirit of close conviviality that is experienced simultaneously with all of Curaçao. This ritualistic well-wishing continues, then, metaphorically including more distant kin and non-kin among one's closest kin through the act of wishing them well, of saying *tur kos bon*. Through the act of recognizing the changing of the year – a kind of taking-stock of one's place within a finite lifetime – with another person, one demonstrates that one's concern for the other involves the other's entire being. Wishing another well indicated that, more than any mundane concerns, one is most interested in another's well-being. From midnight on, and through the coming days and weeks, one's first words should be *tur kos bon* or *bon aña* at each first encounter with a friend during one's daily routines. Not to greet others in this way would be to violate a social convention, and would reflect a fundamental lack of concern for them.

After midnight – the *bolo*, the champagne, and the greetings – those who are interested change their clothes and go on to the kinds of parties that would seem familiar in the United States. The younger Curaçaoans might stay out all night, ending up at a beach for breakfast. Many others will head to a beach later on the 1st of January, after getting a few hours of sleep.

*Aña nobo* is a family-oriented holiday, largely celebrated in private or semi-private clusters, but experienced simultaneously in similar ways by almost all Curaçaoans (compare with Stromberg's 1986 discussion of the members of a Swedish church who shared – though in individually different ways – the experience of "grace," which by representing a "shared" experience became a "symbol of community"). *Aña nobo* is a holiday that reaffirms the importance of one's own kin connections, and that the importance of kin is something one shares with other



Curaçaoans – Jewish or otherwise. By emphasizing kinship throughout the island at a time in which people review their lives – however briefly, *aña nobo* serves as a defining moment of ethnic identity. Kinship is the core social organizing principle on Curaçao at the holiday that may have the most personal significance for Curaçaoans – Christmas may rival *aña nobo* in personal significance for non-Jewish Curaçaoans, but it largely is celebrated in kin units as well. As such, the stature of kinship as possibly the most central social identity on Curaçao is re-enacted annually during *aña nobo*. Kinship, thus, maintains its place as probably the most important realm and the most important metaphor for one's social or group identity. Ethnic identity is thought of as “in the blood” (see Chapter 1).

Though kinship provides a metaphor and a realm in which ethnic identity is perpetuated, kinship is not coterminous with ethnic identity.

## Nodes of ethnic identity

A Berber proverb asserts that Berbers live alone like real men, while Arabs live clustered together in fear, like sheep. The rural Arabic speakers reply that Berbers fight with everyone like wild animals, whereas Arabs are men, who prefer to live in each other's company.

(Rabinow 1977:82)

Descriptions such as Rabinow's illustrate the concept of nodes of ethnic identity. On the dimension of living alone versus living clustered together, Berbers and Arabs each see themselves as differing from the other. Similarly, in regard to the act of fighting versus cooperation and sociability, Berbers and Arabs perceive themselves as distinguishable from each other. Characterizations such as “real men,” “sheep,” and “wild animals” serve to infuse the differences in behavior mentioned above with value or meaning, affect, and ethnocentric assessments.

However, reading into Rabinow, no Berber lives completely alone, and no rural Arab continuously seeks the company of others. Berbers fight for reasons that make sense within the context of their culture, and when they do fight, generally they conform to cultural expectations of how to fight. Rural Arabs, too, live within a cultural context that shapes their everyday lives. Yet, rural Arabs as well as Berbers have passions that bring them into conflict with others, and they participate in a cultural ideology that regards with esteem a constellation of traits often labeled collectively as “masculinity” or “honor.”

There are three cautions to remember when considering the categories of traits associated with ethnic identities:

- 1 They are not evenly distributed among individuals;
- 2 They are not evenly distributed through time in any single individual; and
- 3 They are an ideal that – even if “characteristic” or “stereotypical” – by and large is unrealized.

Rather, an ethnic identity (as with all other cultural categories) is a category that, at most, is approximated in any individual. Those associated with an ethnic identity do not share equally in their “ethnic” understandings and behaviors; those who are ethnically “other” do not share completely their understandings about and behaviors toward those associated with the former ethnic identity; and furthermore, understandings and behaviors associated with ethnic identities are neither uniform nor consistent. It is useful to consider ethnic identity as a node around which understandings, behaviors, and experience coalesce, and as a node (a category) that, while distinguishable from other nodes, is unrealized, inconsistent, and without complete intersubjective agreement. Such (ill)distinguishable nodes may be thought of as being in relation with other nodes; together, these nodes constitute “identities” in a localized social system. Imaginings and rhetoric about these nodes, their relations, and the system of nodes as a whole are what constitute the ethnotheory of social space in a particular locale – an ethnotheory of ethnic identities.

Lakoff (1987) suggests that categories should be thought of in terms of prototypes. Members of a particular category have partial elements of the prototypical properties or characteristics of the category. Members do not each possess each prototypical property, and those who do possess a prototypical property do not possess it uniformly in degree or manner. This has not been considered the appropriate way to understand cognitive categories until recently.

“Traditional” or “objectivist” approaches – to use Lakoff’s terms – to understanding thought and reason stem from “two thousand years of philosophizing ... [that is] still widely believed despite overwhelming empirical evidence” (Lakoff 1987:xi). Objectivist approaches argue that symbols are “*internal representations of external reality*” that correspond “to things in the world independent of the peculiar properties of any organisms” (Lakoff 1987:xiii, italics in original). Such objectivist approaches consider members of categories “in the same category if and only if they have certain properties in common. Those properties are necessary and sufficient conditions for defining the category” (Lakoff 1987:xiv). In other words, in objectivist notions of categories each member possesses every defining property of the category.

However, the problem, Lakoff argues, is that people do not think in categories that accord with a universal logic – we know this from empirical research. Rather, cognition is “embodied” and “imaginative.” What and how we think is embodied in our sensory perception, our motor activity, and – most importantly for the purposes of this discussion – in our social experience. Moreover, we often represent a particular category imaginatively, through metaphor, metonym, and imagery.

Thus, ethnic identity, a category of thought that results in and reflects social groupings, should be viewed as containing “members” with a variety of properties/characteristics.

A node of ethnic identity is a category of ethnic identity without the objectivist assumption that each person ascribed membership in a particular ethnic identity will possess each attribute associated with it, and that those who do share such

attributes will not express them to the same degree. The full constellation of properties associated with the prototype of an ethnic identity might not exist in any single person. Rather, this prototype is – in my terms – a “node” with a variety of characteristics that are understood – rightly or wrongly – as typical of people categorized as belonging to a particular ethnic identity. Thus, a node of ethnic identity always will be a prototype of properties associated with an ethnic identity, regardless of whether there is a significant association between the properties and most of the people understood to be members of the ethnic identity.

A node of ethnic identity is a constellation of properties, among them kinship, experience, understandings, behaviors, and religion, that are thought – wrongly – to represent and to be possessed fully and throughout time by each member of a particular ethnic identity. Instead, each person ascribed membership in an ethnic identity will possess selected attributes associated with the node of ethnic identity, and those attributes and the degree to which a particular individual possesses them may change over time in a person’s life. For example, someone who has converted to Judaism will not have a Jewish mother – assuming she has not converted as well – or other ties of kinship often assumed to be recognized by Jews and to tie Jewish families together. The degree to which one observes Judaic religious rituals may increase and decrease over the course of a person’s life, though that person may consider herself – and be considered by others – to be Jewish throughout each change in religious practice.

Not only are the properties associated with nodes of ethnic identity held selectively and to varying degrees, but the properties associated with a particular node of ethnic identity may change over space and time. However, the fact of such change often will not be recognized either by those ascribed membership in a particular ethnic identity or by those who are cognizant, but not members, of that ethnic identity. As an ethnotheory shaped by powerful forces that in turn shape, and are shaped by, human experience and understandings (see Part I), the ethnic identities in a particular locale will appear to be, and be treated as, a kind of fixed node in social space. Though the nodes will appear to be fixed in relation to each other, the apparently profound and permanent positions of the nodes of ethnic identity actually will be a reified unreality: a reification of social categories, of the perceived-to-be-significant differences and relations between collective groupings of people (for example, as in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*).

In describing ethnic identity in Curaçao in this work, I have presented an example that illustrates the complex interaction of factors by which the categories that correspond with ethnic identities arise. Other factors will have produced the similarly relational nodes of ethnic identity in Morocco described below:

In Morocco the contrast between the inside (*daxel*) and the outside (*xariz*) is used in different ways according to the subject of discussion or circumstances. Inside is home when outside is the street. The inside is Morocco while the rest of the world is turned outside. People from northern Morocco, from Tetouan or Tangier, often refer to those of other regions as those of the interior,

*daxliyya*. This term is pejorative, emphasizing the “interior’s” lack of contact with regions beyond the Mediterranean. Inside and outside take on either negative or positive attributes according to a given situation. Muslim to Christian, Moroccan to Middle Eastern, first world to third: binary terms place borders according to the threats or promises perceived in a given situation. The *xariž* can be menacing in its strangeness or attractive in its promise of loosening the grip of some interior social situation. The process of exerting influence or control includes simplifying the play of inside and outside. One way to fix identities is to view them in terms of ideas of place that are maplike and motionless.

(Ossman 1994:67)

Ossman is pointing, first, to the apparent “maplike” and “motionless” character of social identities. Sets of, in this case binary, names distinguish one group from another, as if planet earth were covered by humans divided into segmented social groupings. The make-up of each group varies by the social grouping through which people are set in opposition to other social groupings. These varying, contextualized “maps” of human social groupings may be fine-grained enough to distinguish one side of a street from another, or the large-grained distinction of “first” and “third” world.

Second, Ossman points to the apparent permanence of these “maps.” (Mis)constructing and (mis)recognizing social space produces constancy in the apparent and (mis)understood social groupings. In this metaphor, “maps, once drawn, are etched permanently on paper.” Ethnotheories of social space are expected to divide the social “landscape” with the same precision and fixity. People want to know where they and others “stand” in relation to each other. A fixed social “map” helps maintain a fixed social order. A fixed social order can be a reassuring experience, irrespective of its illusory character and even when the social order contains great – and repugnant – differences in power.

Yet, establishing fixed positions on the social map was a concept that many I spoke with on Curaçao resisted, despite apparently living their lives as if a map of social groupings existed. Most people distinguished between various social or ethnic identities, but the notion that they were doing so challenged the rhetoric of Curaçao as a place in which ethnic distinctions were to be subjugated to the ideology of Curaçao the unified, singular entity within which ethnic distinctions should become immaterial. For examples of such discourse see the advertisement with which I open Chapter 5 and the description of *karnaval* in the same chapter. Both examples reflect the presence of a “nationalistic”<sup>1</sup> ideology despite widespread awareness of the significant cultural differences present on Curaçao. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates this point further:

The idea that they constituted an ethnic group, and that the island of Curaçao is made up of a variety of ethnic groups were not the way anyone with whom I talked described their social life. More than one person, when I asked them to

tell me the ethnic group to which they belonged [see Appendix 3, question number 24], asked me to define the word “ethnic.” There is no local Curaçaoan term for “ethnic.” “Ethnic” in Papiamentu is *etniko*, in Dutch it is *etnisch*, and in Spanish it is *etnico*. Yet, translating “ethnic” as *etniko* did not help convey my meaning to the people with whom I spoke. On the other hand, people knew a “Sephardi” from an “Ashkenazi” – in Papiamentu *hudiù* and *polako*, respectively. In addition, people recognized such ethnic groupings as, “local” (*yu di Kòrsou*), “Suriname”, “Dutch” (pejoratively, *makamba*), “Hindu,” and “Portuguese” (from the island of Madeira). During formal interviews – in which I took notes conspicuously – people generally did not want to talk about the stereotypical understandings associated with the members of each group. There was a national ideology that the Curaçaoan people are one group, and one should not discuss the frailties of members of one’s group, nor should one make inter-group conflicts known to outsiders. However, everyday conversation occasionally included stereotypical assessments or expectations of one or another ethnically identified group.

The nodes of ethnic identity discussed here existed in people’s minds, despite their awareness of the aspects of ethnic identity that are arbitrary and shift boundaries, and despite their interest in promoting Curaçaoan harmony and integration.

### **Experiencing nodes of ethnic identity as not singular, not unitary, and not constant**

Discussing ethnic identity as if it were a fixed position in social relations belies and betrays much personal experience. In their everyday lives, the Curaçaoans with whom I spoke – Jewish or not – could or would claim varying and sometimes even contradictory group identities. These claims sometimes would confound prevalent and widely expressed understandings of religion, race, and ethnic identity. Below I present various examples about the experience of ethnic identity in Curaçao. I present fourteen instances of what appear to be logically perplexing assertions about a social group/ethnic identity – if ethnic identity is assumed to be singular, unitary, and constant. These instances are distributed between the following six types of categorical inconsistencies: national identities; religious identities; religious/ethnic and racial identities; religious practices; Curaçaoan identity; and linguistic practices.

#### **National identities**

- 1 A Sephardi says: “I feel Spain is my country, not Israel.”

Here, national ancestry, or one’s sense of the roots of one’s particular version of Curaçaoan-ness, surprisingly contradicts the expectations of one with a Jewish

identity. This person with Iberian Jewish ancestors feels more connected with Iberian-ness than with Jewish-ness. Israel seems to this person to be a relatively recent result of the efforts of Jews who are felt to be significantly different than the author of the above statement.

- 2 A life-long Ashkenazi resident of Curaçao serves on jury duty in Miami, Florida in order to maintain United States citizenship.
- 3 An Ashkenazi resident of Curaçao has siblings in Israel, the United States, and Australia.

These two examples illustrate the cross-national affiliation of some Netherlands Antillean citizens.

### **Religious identities**

- 4 There are Catholic Sephardi children who attended the Hebrew School in order to be with their friends who also are their relatives.
- 5 One Sephardi always fasts on *Yom Kippur*, despite saying: "I don't believe in it."

In these examples, Sephardi-ness overrides the lack (in the former) or diminishing (in the latter) of Jewish religious identity. The former example overlaps a Roman Catholic with a Jewish religious identity in order to affirm a Sephardi identity. In the latter example, appearing in the *Snoa* and fasting on *Yom Kippur* practically are "requirements" for Curaçaoan Sephardi (see Chapter 6).

- 6 An Ashkenazi says: "I'm Jewish, but not religious."

Here, being Jewish is taken to be a social, or group, identity (as I argue throughout this volume), and a Judaic religious identity is not understood to be necessary to be a member of the Jewish "People," the Jewish ethnic identity. The person cited above, for example, although not religiously observant, is a member of Congregation Shaare Tsedek, is married to a Jew, attends the synagogue for major religious holidays, and socializes mainly with other Jews, many of whom are either kin or childhood friends.

I was told by several Board members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel that they would not have considered endorsing my research if I had not been Jewish (see Chapter 2). They were willing to continue to strive to overcome our disagreements precisely because I am a Jew; they would not have entered into the process at all if I had not been a Jew. Moreover, they asserted that if I had been a Black Jew, they would have considered endorsing my research just as readily. Clearly, classification/identity as a Jew was an essential factor in enabling my research to proceed.

By singing the folksong "*Am Yisrael Chai*" (the Nation/People of Israel Lives) on

*Simchat Torah* (Chapter 8), members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek also reveal (if perhaps, unintentionally) that they share the widespread understanding among Jews that fellow or sister Jews are expected to be supported as long as their behavior is not anti-Jewish in some way. Even then, such Jews may receive support from other Jews if they request it, have kin who identify as Jews, or are the target of anti-Semitism, for example.

So, religious belief or practice is not a necessary ingredient in being considered to have a Jewish identity. One conceivably could be an atheist and still be considered a member of the Jewish People. Classification as Jew or non-Jew is a significant distinction made by members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and by members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek. This shared value about their shared identity supports social ties between the two groups, despite many differences between the groups' members.

A Jew may indicate Jewish peoplehood through a variety of behaviors, both secular and sacred – in my terms these are “indicators” or “markers” of ethnic identity, or, as Lakoff discusses (see above, p. 141), through metaphor, metonym, and imagery. Membership in a synagogue and participation in Judaic religious rituals in most cases are an obvious reflection of Jewish identity. An exception I found in Curaçao was the non-Jewish Afro-Curaçaoan woman who, with no intention of converting to Judaism, regularly attended worship services at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. In addition, other markers may be perceived as reflecting a Jewish identity to other Jews, such as social interaction with other Jews, marriage to a Jew, Zionist or other political activity in support of the Jewish People, and participation in knowledge, understandings, and experiences deemed to be “typical” of Jews.

However, there are a wide variety of ways in which Jews practice Judaism as well as other behaviors that indicate Jewish identity. The Jewish religion has no ultimate arbiter of the proper way to be a Jew. There is no Pope, for example. In Israel, the definition of “who is a Jew” is a controversial political issue. “Orthodox” Jews identify as Jews only those who are born to Jewish women, or who convert to Judaism through traditional practices. “Reform” Jews now recognize as Jews children born to a Jewish father. However, a child of a Reform Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother who has not converted to Judaism – however much the child as an adult may participate fully in Reform Judaic observances – could not automatically become a citizen of Israel according to that country’s “Law of Return” which allows any Jew in the world – who is considered a Jew in accordance with Orthodox notions – to come to Israel with immediate full citizenship. Such a person would have to apply for citizenship in the same way as a foreign “alien” to most nations in the world. If citizenship were granted, this offspring of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother would not be allowed to marry a Jewish spouse in Israel, for there is no civil marriage in Israel. All weddings must be performed by a religious functionary, and an Orthodox rabbi would not perform what would be, for him, an inter-religious wedding. Thus, though one may be considered a Jew by other Jews largely according to the circumstances of one’s birth and the type of Judaism



practiced, the degree to which one follows Judaic religious practices is not a determining factor in whether one is perceived by other Jews to be Jewish.

Yet, though one is understood to be Jewish by other Jews, one's acceptance by other Jews as a Jew frequently varies. Acceptance often is a matter of degree, depending to some extent on whether one behaves in ways that reflect commitment, affiliation, or identification as a member of the Jewish People. At times, the degree to which a "born Jew" is considered to be a "good Jew" is indicated to some Jews by the degree to which one observes Judaic religious practices. I attended synagogue services fairly regularly during my field research in order to observe the practice of religious ritual and to keep and make contacts in the Jewish community. An unexpected result of this research practice was that it contributed to the impression that I was a "good Jew." Moreover, as a "good Jew" I could be relied upon to write about Curaçaoan Jews with compassion and understanding; thus, it increased my access to some people. Both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Curaçaoan Jews assessed the degree to which other Curaçaoan Jews were "good Jews" according to a variety of factors understood to indicate this matter. Both "who is a Jew" and the degree of one's Jewish identity are matters in dispute among Jews in Curaçao and elsewhere – reflecting the ill-defined boundary of Jewish identity and indicating that Jewish identity may be considered one of many nodes in social space, as discussed above.

#### 7 A Jewish Sephardi is godparent to a child of a Moslem Arab Curaçaoan friend.

This was told to me in 1991, before the advances in the Middle East peace process that followed the Gulf War. At the time some Israelis and Palestinians, some Israelis and Arabs, and, in some quarters, Jews and Moslems, considered themselves enemies. In this example, however, friendship built around close social contact, and shared Curaçaoan residency and identity, were felt to supersede antagonisms based on religious identity or peoplehood that might have been found elsewhere in the world. Jewish identity, in this example, was not the primary ethnic identity in a specific context of the person discussed, indicating that ethnic identity for some people is multiple and may shift.

### ***The mixture of religious/ethnic and racial identities***

#### 8 A non-Jewish Curaçaoan claims to be successful in business due to Sephardi "blood."

This refers to the children or descendants of Sephardi Curaçaoan men and Afro-Curaçaoan women – sometimes called *yu di hudiu* (Abraham-Van der Mark 1980, 1993) (see Chapters 2 and 3). *Yu di hudiu* usually are considered "mulatto," because in comparison with other Afro-Curaçaoans they often are considered to have relatively light skin. However, not all Curaçaoans who are understood to be mulattoes



are *yu di hudiu*. Some mulattoes have Dutch ancestors or come from other places and have non-Sephardi, non-Dutch light-skinned ancestors.

*Yu di hudiu* often are fairly close socially. For decades they tended to live in a particular neighborhood and often had slight financial or educational advantages over others considered to be Afro-Curaçaoan, because their Sephardi parent helped them to some degree. However, such aid is not what is referred to in the above quote. Here, Sephardi business acumen is understood to be a genetic characteristic inherited by the speaker.

To complicate this example further, it was not clear to me that the speaker, in fact, had Sephardi ancestors. I considered it possible that the speaker adopted the claim of Sephardi descent in order to affirm apparent success in business and to intimidate competitors with a claim of inherent advantage, despite the speaker's, to my knowledge, limited social contact with Curaçaoan Sephardi. In any case, this person in effect made a claim of mixed race and Sephardi identity that lacked a basis in significant social articulation – that is, in significant ties of recognized kinship or in friendship – with either Curaçaoan Sephardi or *yu di hudiu*, and that therefore drew upon the metaphor of blood (that is, genetics) to assert ownership of a talent – the ability to profit significantly in one's business. The purely racial/genetic quality of this person's claim stands in opposition to Sephardi Jewish social practice, in which such shared cultural/*learned* attributes – such as entrepreneurial knowledge – are acquired through social interactions with Sephardi who operate businesses. That is, Sephardi generally gain the experience and financial means to operate a business through personal ties, usually with kin. To the best of my knowledge, this was not the case with this apparently light-skinned Afro-Curaçaoan. An ethnic identity was asserted because of characteristics associated with that identity, rather than because of recognized kinship. Though the claim of kinship was problematic, racial/genetic descent was asserted to be at the root of this person's business acumen (a behavioral characteristic). This claim confounded the basis upon which race is understood to depend – that is, on genetic inheritance. Indeed, it may be that in this case skin color in and of itself was thought sufficient, or that it would appear to be sufficient, to determine both business acumen and Sephardi descent, a behavioral characteristic and a kinship tie.

- 9 A Catholic child of Sephardi and Afro-Curaçaoan parents attends part of the *Yom Kippur* service in the *Snoa*.

As with the shopkeeper discussed above, this behavior reflects the perceived importance of kinship among Curaçaoans generally, and among Sephardi in particular. Here, ties of kinship supersede religious and racial differences. Though not Jewish, this adolescent attends an important Jewish holiday service to affirm a sense of connection with Sephardi ancestors. The connection, too, is reaffirmed regularly through social interaction with Jewish Sephardi kin. Though not white and not Jewish, this adolescent's social/ethnic grouping at times centers around the Sephardi Jewish "node" on Curaçao. Also, non-Sephardi and non-Jews on Curaçao

recognize the adolescent as being connected socially with Sephardi Jews. Yet, among Jews elsewhere in the world, this would not be the case.

***Religious practices that mix together representations from different religions***

10 A Catholic church has a Star of David placed prominently on its altar.

I learned about this in an interview with a Sephardi Jew and later went to the church to see it for myself. At the church I spoke with a layperson present at the time. The person's explanation sounded much like what I was told by a Sephardi Jew about the Christmas tree in their home (Chapter 8). For both, the objects I understood to be incongruently present were believed to be universal symbols of peace or of good will. Neither felt that the symbol associated with the other religion was out of place or a threat to their own religious beliefs; thus, the practice reflected the significant role of local understandings in determining how to distinguish between social groupings of people, including both who is understood to be affiliated with which grouping, and what markers or practices are understood to reflect social distinctions.

11 There is clandestine use of the Sephardi cemetery to conduct Afro-Curaçaoan religious rituals.

Here, an attempt is made by some Afro-Curaçaoans to appropriate the power attributed to Sephardi Jews. This reflects the existence of power differentials in Curaçaoan society, the use of religion as an arena in which to attempt to ameliorate power differences, and the willingness of the practitioners of Afro-Curaçaoan religion (*brua*) to incorporate symbols from Judaism into their practice.

***The contested construction of Curaçaoan identity***

12 An early fieldnote:

I was introduced to the power of the concept of "local" – as it was translated into English from "*yu di Kòrsou*" – early in my research by a government official. This official, with a surname common to Sephardi Jews, asked me about the purpose of my stay on Curaçao as I was in the process of applying for a temporary residence permit. I said that my purpose was to conduct research into the Sephardi Jews of Curaçao. He said that I should study the "local" people instead. But, I queried, aren't the Sephardi Jews local, too? This, the official could not dispute; he admitted it with a pointed lack of enthusiasm, and terminated our conversation.

Many Afro-Curaçaoans opine that the time has arrived for them to attain positions of power in Curaçaoan society (see Chapter 5). Such politico-economic aspirations inhibit the open recognition that Sephardi Jewish settlement on Curaçao began early in the Dutch colonial period, and that Curaçaoan residency of the ancestors of some Sephardi predates that of many Afro-Curaçaoans. This may limit the ability or willingness of the official mentioned above to countenance legitimate claims to Curaçaoan-ness expressed by Curaçao Sephardi – possibly to the extent that his own conceivable Sephardi ancestry is denied. The example reveals a struggle over the prototypical characteristics to associate with Curaçaoan identity, a struggle that takes place across the social boundaries constructed between people ascribed to different races.

### ***Linguistic practices that reflect multiple, shifting identities***

- 13 There are Sephardi siblings born in Cuba who speak Spanish among themselves, but Papiamentu with their children, their spouses, and with their siblings who were not born in a Spanish-speaking country.
- 14 A *Snoa* service was held largely in Spanish out of consideration for South American relatives present at the time.

If language is considered to reflect a national identity, here, too, are examples of the multi-lingual (and multi-national?) identities of some Sephardi Curaçaoans (see Chapter 5 for additional discussion of language and identity in Curaçao). The above-mentioned siblings say that they are equally comfortable speaking Spanish or Papiamentu. However, their childhood socialization as Spanish-speakers has left them reporting that it seems “natural” to speak in Spanish with those of their siblings who were born in Cuba. This is reported as a pattern begun in childhood, which has continued with specific people, rather than as a longing for life in Cuba. With some intimate kin, they most likely will speak in Spanish, while with other intimate kin they likely will use Papiamentu. When one considers that this pattern has persisted for six or seven decades, it may be considered a significant component of their lives.

When the pattern is considered in conjunction with the high likelihood that they will use Papiamentu to speak with other family members, it appears to reflect the complex intersection of socialization with kin and national identities as manifested linguistically. The pattern exists despite and because of their Sephardi Curaçaoan-ness. Despite their immersion in Curaçaoan life and in Papiamentu, they maintain a “space” of difference, of otherness from Curaçaoan Sephardi. Yet, this difference itself also is indicative of Curaçaoan Sephardi. For centuries, Sephardi have come and gone from Curaçao; adults have moved elsewhere and their children or grandchildren have returned, or families have moved away only to return some years later. The above-mentioned siblings followed a well-traversed path among Curaçaoan Sephardi. Thus, although the “node” for Curaçaoan

Sephardi in the local social “map” characteristically includes a high degree of affiliation and rootedness in things Curaçaoan, paradoxically, it also includes significant residence elsewhere – along with corresponding language use. Group social identities can be ascribed in many possible ways. For example, the siblings discussed above could be identified as Jewish, Curaçaoan, Cuban, Caribbean, and Sephardi. Identity ascription can change as one moves from one role to another and from one social setting to another. Every specific, particular marker of identity, such as the language one speaks, holds many possible meanings. Furthermore, markers are comprehended and interpreted in association with other markers. Identities are not ascribed on the basis of one marker alone.

Sephardi Curaçaoans are by no means unusual among other Curaçaoans, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, in regard to linguistic practices. A degree of fluency in four languages is common in Curaçao. Most Curaçaoans speak Papiamentu, while Dutch is the language of instruction in most Curaçaoan schools and in much governmental activity. In addition, many speak English and Spanish, at least passably well, and minorities speak Chinese, Portuguese, Sranang Tongo, and other languages. In Curaçao, choosing which language to speak is an aspect of life that can be used to mark identity in a plethora of ways.

### Local understandings and crafting an ethnic identity

I now would like to return to the *Romeo and Juliet* story told in the introduction to this volume in order to discuss identity crafting. When Hannah and Robert returned to Curaçao after their respective divorces, two things had changed. First, Robert’s parents had died. Second, though Hannah continued to encounter some opposition, she was inclined to persevere more strongly in her relationship with Robert. Hannah was stronger and more mature. She was now more willing to appear to flaunt the norms of her community by entering into a relationship with a non-Jew. These changes led to new resolutions of their *Romeo and Juliet*-like dilemma, of their relationship, and of the day-to-day ways in which ethnicity was reflected in their lives. After their marriage, Hannah and the now-converted Robert, paradoxically, acquired leadership positions in the Curaçaoan Jewish community, specifically in Congregation Shaare Tsedek. These changes reflect Hannah and Robert’s changed responses to Curaçaoan social boundaries, and suggest some of the strategies for “crafting” (Kondo 1990) ethnic identity available to others.

The ethnic identities crafted by Robert and Hannah were shaped by their perceptions of the nodes of social identity available to them in the Curaçaoan social landscape. In what local groupings could they feel accepted? In what groupings would they fit appropriately, wish to participate, and find satisfaction? These potential social locations were limited by the acceptance of others and by Hannah and Robert’s imaginations.

Associated with each possible social node was an array of ethnically signifying markers from which Robert and Hannah could craft their social identities. There

were markers in the domains of education, occupation, material consumption or lifestyle, language, religious practice, and more. By attending Jewish religious services, participating in congregational activities, and living where they did, and through their choices of people with whom to socialize, for example, Hannah and Robert came to embody and to exhibit to others a Curaçaoan Jewish, Ashkenazi–Sephardi social identity. They took up lifeways that made apparent the renewed vigor of their connection with Curaçao rather than with Canada or the Netherlands. Although Robert continued to maintain his ties with other Sephardi, he forged strong, new ties with Ashkenazi. Hannah continued her deep involvement with Curaçaoan Ashkenazi, broadening it with ties to Sephardi who had become kin. These new craftings of their social identities were demonstrated daily through myriad commonplace actions that functioned as markers, such as gift giving and to whom they placed personal telephone calls.

The volition with which Robert and Hannah adopted markers and affiliated with nodes of social identity was circumscribed by their life experiences. Their choices, though not automatic or predetermined, were shaped by their position and socialization into the Curaçaoan social landscape. Their actions were influenced by understandings of their class, race, and kin ties, for example – as well as by the patterns of thought and desire commonly produced through class, race, and kinship. As mentioned above, these potential choices were finite, but they were surprisingly bountiful, as well. Hannah and Robert could have chosen to flee from the opposition to their relationship. They did not have to continue to live in Curaçao. They could have acceded once again and dissolved their relationship a second time. Alternatively, they could have maintained a secret – or unrecognized – relationship, perhaps remaining lovers, but not marrying. Or, they could have married and then disassociated themselves from Hannah’s community, or entered into an oppositional relationship with it. They could have joined a new community altogether. They elected not to do any of these.

The choice, the agency with which Hannah and Robert proceeded to sway the opposition, undergo conversion, and marry according to community norms and with the acceptance of community members, constitutes some of the significant steps through which they crafted their ethnic identities. Hannah’s choice may appear to have been determined by the fact that she was born and raised in a locale to which she has returned and in which she continues to reside. However, she had lived in the Netherlands for years and had professional credentials that could have provided her with a better than adequate income there. She could have used her Dutch passport – a possession of all citizens of the Netherlands Antilles – to reside in the Netherlands. There, she could have wed Robert, and the two of them could have associated with non-traditional Jews or with non-Jews.

Robert’s ancestors were Jews, but not his mother. His brother married a Sephardi-Jewish woman, but did not convert to Judaism. There were ample alternative models for Robert to follow in crafting his ethnic identity. He could have affiliated with Curaçao Sephardi, but not as a Jew. At the time of my fieldwork, for example, there were at least two other men, Sephardi by descent but not Jewish,

who married non-Jewish women. Both of these men maintain close ties of friendship and association with Sephardi of Curaçao. They attend Sephardi religious services to mark rites of passage, but not for routine worship. In addition, Robert's conversion was in the Sephardi congregation, so he could have continued to worship primarily at that congregation rather than in the Ashkenazi congregation. Of course, Robert, like Hannah, has a Dutch passport and the option to reside and work in the Netherlands. To the outside observer, his actual choice – to participate actively in the Ashkenazi congregation in Curaçao – seems one of the least probable alternatives.

However, both Hannah and Robert feel a sense of identity that derives from place. They, along with many other Curaçaoans with whom I spoke, feel at home in the Curaçaoan climate, speaking Papiamentu, living close to a variety of kin, and according to a certain pace.

I once arrived just over five minutes late for an informal appointment at the home of a man from Sint Eustatius – another island in the Netherlands Antilles. The man's first comment was that, though late, I was right on time, "just like a Dutchman." Although five minutes late, in comparison with Curaçaoan timing I exhibited the stereotypical extreme punctuality of Netherlanders. This sense of pace is a means of identification with place and one of many metaphors for Curaçaoan ethnic identity. The social beings who occupy Curaçaoan space share practices and knowledge, share intersubjectivities that are embodied, that constitute part of each's "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977; also see, for example, Basso 1984; Watts 1992).<sup>2</sup> Curaçaoans can practice this "Curaçaoan-ness" fully only when in Curaçao. Those who embody Curaçaoan practice and knowledge can be most completely Curaçaoan only on Curaçao. Hannah and Robert, then, are shaped actors – their embodied Curaçaoan-ness informs their recognized choices and propels without fixing their actions. Their sense of place, their "rootedness" is Curaçaoan. They may choose to live elsewhere, but there is much drawing them to Curaçao and to specific social identities present there. In this sense, identity is more than a "name." Social or ethnic identity is the name given to groups of people who practice similarly and share knowledge. Therefore, to "craft" an ethnic identity, one is required to draw on shared patterns of thought, and from the social affiliations available locally.

In this chapter, then, I have argued that in practice ethnic identities do not depend on genetic inheritance, and do not remain the same for every individual in every context or throughout a lifetime. One often can claim more than one ethnic identity, and be ascribed to more than one ethnic identity by others. In practice, ethnic identities in Curaçao – though constrained and shaped by ecological, historical, politico-economic, and cultural forces (see Part I) – are localized, ongoing constructions of understandings about one's own and others' social places. Place is associated strongly with ties of kinship that sometimes transcend or violate the social boundaries of religion and race, and which only partially accord with indicators or markers that approximate – but do not fully realize – prototypical

characteristics. These prototypes might be assumed to describe each member of a particular ethnic identity completely and inclusively; in fact, however, they merely function as guides or nodes around which those ascribed and ascribing to a particular ethnic identity comply to varying degrees in varying contexts. The question for anthropologists and for others interested in social relations is whether this notion of ethnic identity applies in other social settings. I imagine that as long as one accounts for differences in context, it applies widely. Ethnic identity in many places reflects a localized theory of social groupings in which the “members” of the grouping to varying degrees approximate the prototypical characteristics or attributes ascribed to each grouping.

# Conclusion

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Social space is textured out of a landscape of understandings, out of a landscape of memories and imagination, out of landscapes of bodily phenotype, language, religion, and birthplace, and, not the least, out of a political economy. Social space is textured; it acquires contours and colors that often are impregnated with actual and metaphoric ties of blood and kinship. Collectivities of persons who are signifying, and that which is signified, are cloven and coalesce. Circumscribed – as well as far-flung, prevailing – intersubjectivities demarcate oneself and one's neighbors into a social topography, into various "us's" and "thems." It is these invisible, though sometimes physically apparent, saliences of the social topography that I call ethnic identities.

Ethnic identity among Jews in Curaçao – in part among many non-Jewish Curaçaoans as well – is composed of a variety of factors. It is located in a particular ecology that provides limited potential parameters in such realms as subsistence activities, habitat, comfort and lifestyle, and geographic imagination. It may be found in imagined and salient narratives of history. Ethnic identity is located in narratives about Native American "Curaçaoans" no longer present, and in narratives about colonialism, trade, slavery, and Dutch social institutions and culture. Narratives of history are reenacted and transformed that draw from Iberian Jewish life, the Jewish Expulsion from Iberia, and the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. These narratives also draw from Iberian-Jewish settlement in the Netherlands and the Americas, from religio-politico-economic Jewish social organization, from Jewish history and migration from Eastern Europe, from Jewish religious ideology and practice, and from contrasting Jewish presences on Curaçao. These ethnic identities also draw on contemporary Curaçaoan social relations in the realms of race, religion, political organization, labor, finance, commerce, and gender.

Contemporary social relations, though historically and ecologically circumscribed, have produced collectivities of people perceived by themselves and by other local collectivities to differ significantly from one another. Some of these perceived differences have been shaped by enormous or practical differences in power, status, and opportunity. Capital, race, and military might, for example, strongly shape perceptions of collective differences.

In Curaçao, the collectivity of Jews breaks down into two distinguishable and



differentiated groupings, Ashkenazi and Sephardi or *polako* and *hudi*. Within these groupings, consanguineal and affinal ties of kinship, both actual and metaphoric, circumscribe and index identities that may be described as ethnic. This applies to non-Jewish Curaçaoans, as well.

Perceived significant differences are represented symbolically, are indexed or marked, through an enormous variety of behaviors, understandings, and experiences. Minute differences in such realms as language, dress, religion, physical appearance, diet, education, and occupation, for example, often are perceived as having great utility and significance in differentiating between social collectivities.

Constellations of these perceived-to-be-significant markers coalesce into categories of ethnic identity among local Curaçaoans. Indices of perceived significant collective difference – of a node of ethnic identity – are possessed variably by the individuals ascribed membership in a social grouping. Such “nodes” of identity never are realized fully by those categorized as members of a collectivity. Nodes of ethnic identity are not unitary; each person classified as having an ethnic identity will have some, but not all, of the prototypical traits ascribed to the node understood to represent that particular ethnic identity. In addition, nodes of ethnic identity are not singular; people ascribed membership in a particular ethnic identity possess traits associated with other ethnic identities; it is difficult to conceive of anyone who could be categorized as belonging to only one ethnic identity. Moreover, nodes of ethnic identity are not constant; a person may be ascribed different ethnic identities over the course of a lifetime and in differing local contexts.

Knowledge of the nodes of ethnic identity understood to exist in a particular locale, and of the relations between the nodes (however imperfectly the constellation of traits is realized in individuals) produces ethnotheories of social space. An ethnotheory of social space is a kind of cognitive map of perceived significant collective differences and relations in a particular locale that is represented by markers of ethnic identity.

Classifying practices are a heteroglossic, intersubjective, and interactive activity by which collectivities of people are categorized. These practices are specific to the locale in which they occur. They are based on ecological–historical–economic–political–religious–racial–kin forces that shape, are reinterpreted, and are selectively adopted by individual agents within a skein of contemporary social relations. Perceived differentiations between ethnic identities are marked and manipulated – are mediated – through locally meaningful signifiers.

Thus, classifying practices of ethnic identity are produced within the parameters of contemporary, locally based social relations, from local perceptions of the local history of social relations, and – to a lesser extent – from the local ecology. This contingent setting for classifying practices constitutes the “material” from which collectivities or groupings of people in a particular region – e.g., the island of Curaçao – have been produced that are perceived to be distinguishable from one another, both by those within and those outside a particular distinguishable collectivity. Such collectivities are identified through traits or characteristics perceived to differentiate between them. The traits, though, are prototypes. Individuals

selectively approximate the prototypical traits perceived to mark them as members of a particular ethnic identity. Depending on the context, individuals may possess traits of, and be ascribed membership in, more than one ethnic identity. Also, individuals may change from one ethnic identity to another over time. The prototypical traits that mark ethnic identities may change over time as well. The groupings of prototypical traits that mark collectivities of people are shaped significantly by kinship, and metaphors of kinship are one marker of perceived social differentiation. The social groupings indexed as ethnic identities in a particular locale coalesce and cleave into “nodes” of association, affiliation, and perceived similarity marked by corresponding nodes of prototypical traits. These nodes of ethnic identity in a local space exist in relation to one another to produce ethnotheories of social space and “landscapes” of ethnic identities.

The classifying practices approach to the topic of ethnic identity has implications for issues of well-being and of inter-ethnic relations.

In regard to well-being, classifying practices involving ethnic identities might produce ambivalence and incongruities in persons – that is, might “pull” them in differing directions, making it more difficult to cope. On the other hand, they might provide one with greater adaptive capacity; they might provide material for adaptive syntheses in rapidly changing societies. Due to the differences in traditions and values between differentiated ethnic groups, persons with a blend of ethnic identities sometimes have experiences that are disjunctive. Nonetheless, shifting enactments of membership in ethnic identities might increase one’s adaptive capacity, for example, by widening one’s network of potential supporters. This latter scenario contrasts with much of mental health and personality theory, which assumes that a “whole” person is a healthy person, that persons need to maintain ego boundaries, and identity is unitary, singular, and constant.

Ethnic identities in complex, industrial societies are a multiplex weave of disparate strands combined in individual persons. For example, people living in urban areas of the United States exist in, and reflect contested and differentiated, yet proximate, social space. These social spaces are far from monocultural. In addition to struggles over power, people living in these social spaces are affected by the profusion of possible roles and territory, values and understandings about what is important in life, how people should live together, and what is just. James Baldwin (1961:22) points out the variety and potentiality inherent in United States society:

American writers do not have a fixed society to describe. The only society they know is one in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity. This is a rich confusion, indeed, and it creates for the American writer unprecedented opportunities.

Similarly, the case of James Meredith is interesting (Yett 1989). Accompanied by at least 16,000 troops, Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 while United States Senator Jesse Helms was claiming that the associates of Rev.

M. L. King, Jr. were communists and sex perverts. Later Meredith was to work for Helms. Was Meredith's experience one of disjunctions and ambivalence, or one of synthesis and adaptation?

Classifying practices involving ethnic identities also affect social upheaval and social order – and vice versa. The attitude that says that members of an ethnic group other than one's own are to be defined “thus” often is a prior condition for the decision to commit atrocities. Misplaced application of poorly understood markers of ethnic identity has led to disaster for people with a variety of ethnic identities. Prejudice, discrimination, and genocide have followed the constructed lines of ethnic categorization. It can be dangerous to claim that a particular ethnic group has certain specific, immutable characteristics.

Recent events in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and in Rwanda demonstrate that ethnic identities are powerful motivators of behavior, even when the identity has been supposed to be subsumed by a larger, state society with the passage of time. The ramifications – politically, economically, and militarily – of the classifying practices involving ethnic identities include civil warfare, mass migrations, and shifts in the global geo-political balance of power. Classifying practices involving ethnic identities should not be taken lightly. The significations of ethnicity transform world social organization, and ethnic conflicts are typified as being particularly intractable.

Rethinking ethnic identities as deriving from classifying practices might repudiate claims of ethnic superiority. The contextualized, shifting boundaries of ethnic identity derive more from our tendency to classify than from real difference. In a world aware of the processes of ethnic classifying, ethnic discrimination loses its justification.

As a Jew – and especially because this volume is about Jews – I feel compelled to address a question Jews, as a minority almost everywhere we live, often ask. The question has to do with whether something is “good for the Jews.” I would argue that the approach taken in this work is good for Jews and for non-Jews alike. The reason is this. If ethnic identity is something constructed culturally, if it is not inheritable or genetic, then rationales for bigotry, discrimination, and oppression may lose their force. Romeo and Juliet may become Robert and Hannah. That is, the ethnic and racial differences that people say they find between themselves and others are not inborn, are changeable, and fail to constitute a basis for violence toward those perceived to be other. Since groupings of people will never conform to the stereotypes – to the prototypical traits of ethnic identity that are constructed about them – there is no reason to block certain groups of people from educational opportunities, occupations, neighborhoods, or leadership. In addition, recognizing the constructed character of ethnic identities does not threaten the richness, legacies, and contributions of the cultures of differing ethnic groups. Cultural diversity exists, but is learned. We must recognize the constructed character of our social differentiations in order to respect the culture of the “other,” to reclaim and integrate the disavowed traits transferred from “us” to “other” social collectivities, and to produce a more just social universe.

## Appendix 1

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### Questionnaire

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Name (*optional*): .....

Sex: ..... Age: ..... Years of membership at the *Snoa*: .....

Childhood place of worship and religion: .....

Some of this material may be published. No true names will appear. An attempt will be made to keep identities anonymous, including possible changes in the identifying features. If you consent to publication under these conditions, then sign your name and write the date on the lines indicated below.

I have read the above and understand it.

(signature) ..... (date) .....

If you need more space for any question, please write on the back.

- (i) When you think about the *Snoa* as a building, what comes to your mind?
- (ii) Please write about the two most memorable experiences you have had in the *Snoa*. These may be personal experiences, ceremonies, etc. They may be recent or from years ago. They may involve religion, or be entirely secular. Tell me how the *Snoa* building influenced those experiences, or what designs, furnishings, or architecture in the *Snoa* you noticed during the experiences. Do you, for example, associate a particular physical structure in the *Snoa* with a particular memory, thought, event, or feeling?

1

2

- (iii) Please write what emotions the following physical structures in the *Snoa* invoke in you, what memories they call up, or how you think about them:

1 *Heychal*

2 *Tebah*

3 *Banca*

4 Congregants' benches

5 Sand flooring

- (iv) Are there other physical structures or characteristics of the *Snoa* that you think are especially important? If so, what are they, and why are they important?
- (v) In this space please write any comments you wish to make about the *Snoa*, this survey, and this research.

## Appendix 2

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# Protocol for first semi-structured interview

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### Part 1

#### ***Demographic information***

- 1 What is your full name?
- 2 What is your birth date and wedding date, if applicable?
- 3 Where were you born?
- 4 Describe your residential (e.g., Curaçao, Venezuela, etc.), educational (including religious), and occupational histories.
- 5 Describe your wedding: the venue, the religion used in the ceremony (if applicable), and any party held.
- 6 As applicable – and in shorter answers – for your spouse(s), children, parents, siblings, and (more briefly) your siblings' spouses, answer numbers 1–4 above, provide dates of their deaths, and say in which religion weddings were conducted.
- 7 Briefly describe your parents' personalities.

### Part 2

#### ***Social network information***

- 1 Who do you telephone regularly?  
How often?  
If applicable, which are Jews?
- 2 Other than to professionals, to whom do you go for advice?  
Who comes to you for advice?
- 3 To what clubs and organizations do you belong?
- 4 Other than immediate family, to whom do you give gifts?  
From whom do you receive gifts?  
If Jewish, do you participate in the *lista*? If so, elaborate on how it works.

### **Part 3**

#### ***Most significant holiday to you***

- 1 What holiday(s) is(are) most important to you?
- 2 How do you observe that(those) holiday(s)?

Where; with whom; what foods do you eat at the time?

As applicable, I also asked whether specific customs (usually Curaçaoan) are practiced for the holiday(s) mentioned by the interviewee.

### **Part 4**

#### ***Synagogue attendance***

- 1 Why do you go to synagogue?
- 2 What do you like about services?

### **Part 5**

#### ***“Not-speaking” relationships***

- 1 Are you familiar with “not-speaking” relationships? [These are called *nuá*; or, described as, *nan no ta papia ku otro* (they do not speak with each other). In some interviews, I described a scenario in which A and B, who are close, suddenly stop speaking with each other. However, A and B may continue to have the same friends, attend the same parties, and keep up with the news about each other by listening to – but not participating in – gossip about the other.]
- 2 If so, describe how they work.
  - What might cause this?
  - What might bring this to an end?

## Appendix 3

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# Protocol for second semi-structured interview

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### Part 1

#### General knowledge

- 1 When did Aruba gain *status aparte*?  
{*Status aparte* refers to Aruba's withdrawal from the Netherlands Antilles, January 1, 1986, becoming a separate political entity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. See Chapter 5.}<sup>1</sup>
- 2 When did the Dutch emancipate the slaves?  
{1863}
- 3 What are the main reasons to celebrate *Shavuot*?  
{The Jewish "Festival of Weeks," falling seven weeks after Passover; a spring harvest festival, that commemorates receiving the *Torah*.}
- 4 When did Temple Emanu-El separate from Congregation Mikvé Israel?  
{Asked of members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. 1864. See Chapter 6.}
- 5 Where were the first Ashkenazi places of worship located in Curaçao?  
{Asked of members of Congregation Shaare Tsedek. On *Bargestraat*, in *Scharloo*, near *St. Anna Baai*.}
- 6 When is a *brit mila* held?  
{Asked of Jews. The circumcision of male infants on their 8th day of life (i.e., the 7th day after their birth).}
- 7 Describe the structure of government on Curaçao?  
{See Chapter 5.}

### Part 2

#### National identification

- 8 What is your nationality?
- 9 What language do you speak at home with your family?
- 10 Draw a circle. Imagine that the circle is a "pie" that represents you – your identity. Draw pieces of the pie – of you – to represent the different groups that make up the total you – from which you are made. Each piece of the pie should represent a different part of you. Make the size of each slice of the pie different in order to represent the relative importance of each part of you that you list.



- 11 How many generations has your family lived on Curaçao?
- 12 Do you vote? In what country? What is your political affiliation?
- 13 Do you read a Curaçaoan newspaper? Which?
- 14 Do you watch *Telekòrsou*?  
{Curaçaoan state television.}
- 15 Do you listen to local radio? Which station? Do you have a favorite program?
- 16 What do you like about Curaçao? Dislike?
- 17 When you travel off the island, where do you tell strangers that you are from?
- 18 If you did not live on Curaçao, where would you live?
- 19 If a person leaves Curaçao can they stop being a Curaçaoan?
- 20 Why is there violent ethnic conflict in Bosnia, but not in Curaçao?
- 21 What is the major political problem of Curaçao?
- 22 In which neighborhood do you live?
- 23 Are there any kinds of places on Curaçao to which you would not go?
- 24 What are the other ethnic groups that you know about in Curaçao? How would you characterize the people in each of those groups? Rank order those groups from those with people you think contribute the most to society to those with people you think contribute the least.
- 25 What is your opinion on the recent actions of the labor unions?  
{See Chapter 4.}

## Part 3

### *Curaçaoan customs*

- 26 Do you put up a Christmas tree?
- 27 Do you use *sénsia*?  
{Incense used, generally at the secular New Year, to cleanse a building of evil spirits, *fukú*.}
- 28 Do you have any favorite children's stories that you heard as a child?
- 29 Do you have a favorite *nanzi* story?  
{Stories about a trickster spider, with an African root (Geerdink-Jesurun Pinto 1972).}
- 30 When do you take your car for gas?  
{I had noticed families and couples waiting in long lines during the late hours of weekend evenings, and imagined this to be a social activity for some.}
- 31 Do you eat at *truk'i pan*?  
{“Sandwich trucks”; located in roadside trailers; serving hot, Curaçaoan-style food late at night.}
- 32 Is a married man who sleeps with a woman who is not his wife doing something bad?  
{Rumored, and written, to be a common Curaçaoan behavior.}
- 33 Are non-married persons doing something bad if they have sexual intercourse?

- 34 Do you eat *yambo*? If so, with what? *Tutu*? Iguana soup?  
{*Yambo* is a stew, or gumbo, with a variety of recipes. It may contain shrimp, conch, pig's tail, or pig's ear, all of which are not kosher. *Tutu* is a bean and corn meal dish.}
- 35 Do you know anyone who has given someone *oyada* (evil eye)? Have you known anyone who was harmed by *oyada*?
- 36 Do you use aloe to ward off evil?  
{It sometimes is hung by a window or door.}
- 37 Do you use *awa blanka*? Any *yerba* for medicinal purposes?  
{*Awa blanka*, literally "white water," is a general-purpose liquid understood to have healing qualities. *Yerba* means "herb" (see Veeris 1987 for information about Curaçaoan medicinal herbs).}
- 38 Do you celebrate *Aña Reina*? *Dia di trahadó*? *Dia di bandera*? *Seú*? *Sint Nicolaas*? In what way?  
{The Dutch Queen's birthday; Curaçaoan Labor Day; Curaçaoan Flag Day; Curaçaoan Harvest Festival (see Chapter 4); "Saint Nick's Day," a day to exchange small gifts or give gifts to children early in December. Each of these is a relatively minor holiday. I wondered whether any interviewee had a special feeling about any of them.}
- 39 Do you go to *karnaval*? Have you ever participated in a *karnaval* group? In a *jump-up*? Do you go to the *Tumba* Festival?  
{See Chapter 5 about *karnaval* and the *Tumba* Festival. A *jump-up* is a party and fundraiser, often with a mini-parade, held by a *karnaval* group during the weeks preceding *karnaval*.}
- 40 Do you go to listen to *tambú*?  
{This is a Curaçaoan musical beat and type of performance with its roots in slave life. These songs usually are performed prior to the secular New Year, and often satirize well-known figures.}
- 41 Who do you call "*shon*"?  
{Literally, "lord" or "lady." It referred to plantation owners, and now is a term of respect with a variety of changing usages that I wished to explore.}
- 42 Compare how you feel about celebrating *karnaval* with how you feel about celebrating *aña nobo* {the secular New Year}.

## Part 4

### Activities

- 43 Where do you go out to eat?
- 44 Where do you shop for groceries?  
{Curaçaoan supermarkets specialize in different items and vary in character.}
- 45 Where do you bank?  
{One of the largest banks is significantly run and owned by Sephardi.}

- 46 Do you have a favorite television show?
- 47 What sports teams anywhere do you root for?
- 48 Where do you go to a doctor?
- 49 For what activities or events will you buy new clothes?
- 50 What kind of books do you read? Do you subscribe to any magazines? What language(s) do you read in?
- 51 To what charities do you contribute?
- 52 To where off the island do you travel for vacation?
- 53 To what music do you listen?
- 54 Describe your style of living, your taste; is style important to you?

## Part 5

### **Childhood**

- 55 Did you have a *yaya* as a child? If so, where was she from?  
{Asked of people raised in Curaçao. A *yaya* is a live-in childcare provider.}
- 56 What favorite children's songs do you remember?
- 57 What are the basic principles one should follow in raising children who are, say, from 6 to 12 years old in regard to: eating habits; how misbehavior should be disciplined; what study habits they should follow; whether they should receive an allowance; and what responsibilities they should have?
- 58 What is the most important event in a person's life?

## Part 6

### **Group boundaries**

- 59 Are there any group(s) from which you would not want someone to marry into your family?
- 60 Draw a big circle. That is you; now draw the Jewish part of you; now the Curaçaoan part of you.
- 61 What behavior do you regard as hypocrisy? What expected behaviors are sometimes broken by Sephardi [Ashkenazi; members of your religious group]?<sup>2</sup> Do you call that "hypocrisy"?  
{Hypocrisy was a criticism I heard used widely in Curaçaoan discourse.}
- 62 What kinds of persons or of institutions do you see as moral guides in your life?
- 63 What do you expect from the *direktiva* {Board of Directors} of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel [of Congregation Shaare Tsedek]?

## Part 7

### Kinship

- 64 What ancestors prior to your grandparents do you know about?
- 65 Do you visit anyone's gravesite? Whose? When? Where is it located?
- 66 What do you do to remember the dead? Do you say *yartzeit/skaba*? Do you light a candle at that time?  
     {*Yartzeit*, an Ashkenazi term, and *skaba*, a Sephardi term, refer to the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of close kin.}
- 67 If you were just now getting married, in which groups of people could you find a suitable spouse?
- 68 In which groups of people could your children find a suitable spouse?

## Part 8

### Religion

- 69 How often do you attend services?
- 70 Are there any reasons why you stay away from services?  
     {Partly asked on behalf of the Board of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. See Chapter 6.}
- 71 Do you discuss religion with people of different religions?
- 72 Are you more, or less, religious than your parents?
- 73 Should anyone who wants be allowed to convert to Judaism [to your religion]?  
     That is, should there be any restrictions on who can convert?
- 74 What sorts of things should converts have to do to become a Jew [or to join your religion]?
- 75 Is a convert different from someone born Jewish [or, into your religion]?
- 76 How would you describe the connection between your religion and your family? – what role would you say that your family plays in your religious life?
- 77 Is there any connection between your friendships and your religion? If so, what?
- 78 Would you practice your religion to the same extent as now if you were not a member of your current religious community? That is, how important to you is it that you see the specific people now in your congregation at services?
- 79 Is religion, to you, a matter of tradition, ethics, social relations, or something else? Why?

## Part 9

### *Jewish identification*

{Except for number 80, this part was asked of Jews only.}

- 80 What is your religious affiliation? If you were not Jewish [or other religion], what religion would you be? Would you belong to a religious group?
- 81 Would you travel to Israel for vacation? Do you see Israel as a refuge? What would be your solution to the Israeli/Palestinian problem? What was your response/feelings when Israel has been at war?
- 82 Have you experienced anti-Semitism on Curaçao?
- 83 Have you felt the need to play down your Jewishness at any time?
- 84 If you felt discriminated against as a Jew while on Curaçao could you trust non-Jews to help you?
- 85 Do you light Sabbath candles?  
{A custom in traditional Jewish homes on Friday night, before sundown.}
- 86 Do you have a *mezuzah* on your doorpost? Do you wear one?  
{A small object containing a quotation from the Bible that counsels Jews to remember God when passing through doors, among other times.}
- 87 Do you eat bread on Passover?  
{Passover is a spring holiday commemorating the biblical exodus from Egypt. Since the departing Jews had to leave hurriedly, they could not wait for their bread to rise. Traditional Jews commemorate that event for eight days by not eating foods that rise.}
- 88 Do you consider yourself part of a larger community of “Jewish People”?
- 89 Do you feel any kinship with the Jews of Belmonte {Portugal}?  
{See Chapter 6. A film about these *conversos* was screened during my fieldwork.}
- 90 What do you think most threatens the Curaçaoan Jewish community?
- 91 What will the Jewish community of Curaçao be like twenty years from now?

## Part 10

### *Conclusion*

- 92 Describe to me how you think of your ethnic identity, “your people”; now describe how you came to think about it in this way.

## Appendix 4

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### Contract

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The undersigned:

- 1 United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation *Mikvé Israel-Emanuel*, “The Congregation,” domiciled and with its place of business in Curaçao, party of the first part as represented in this present agreement by its President and Secretary  
and
- 2 *Alan Benjamin*, residing in Curaçao (P.O. Box 322) party of the second part

*Understand that:*

*Whereas:* The purpose for which Alan Benjamin has taken up temporary residency on Curaçao is to gather information on the Jewish Community on this island. This information will be used for scholarly anthropological works which he, Alan Benjamin, plans to write and publish.  
and

*Whereas:* Each party willingly participates in this agreement and will consider the other party’s concerns duly and respectfully. The implementation of this agreement will be guided by the following points:

- 1 The Review Committee of The Congregation, mentioned in Article three A. (3(a)) below, recognizes that scholarly work, in order to be significant, requires intellectual freedom and dispassionate reviews which are timely and constructive. As such, the said Review Committee only should reject material from which an adverse effect to a reputation, per Article three D. (3(d)) below, is clear. A valid portrayal, interpretation or conclusion of The Congregation or its members which displeases the Review Committee but will have no clear adverse effect to a reputation should not be rejected.
- 2 Alan Benjamin recognizes that the members of The Congregation comprise a small community on a small island. As such, their reputations are especially vulnerable to public opinion, even if portrayed inaccurately and can be disclaimed. An adverse effect to a reputation may be irreparable. Alan Benjamin further recognizes that a correct portrayal, interpretation or conclusion, if it exposes personal information that is not suitable for public exposure, may affect a reputation adversely. As a member of the American Anthropologists Association, Alan Benjamin abides by its Code of Ethics, which places the welfare of the people studied as the first responsibility of anthropologists.
- 3 Alan Benjamin accepts that The Congregation can evaluate better than he

whether information will have a clear, adverse effect on the reputations of The Congregation or its members. The Congregation accepts that Alan Benjamin can evaluate better than they whether, and which, information, interpretations, and conclusions will be significant to a scholarly audience, thus, worthy of publication.

*Therefore each party:*

*Declares to have agreed as follows:*

- 1 As regards information gathered concerning United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, The Congregation will lend its cooperation to Alan Benjamin in the aforementioned project by encouraging its membership to give information to him, provided such information can and is allowed to be made public.
- 2 Alan Benjamin shall, in the use of such information, adhere, but not be limited, to the data as provided by members of The Congregation, and shall not include any data in his writings which are not verified as correct.
- 3
  - (a) The draft of any publication shall, as far as it concerns United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and its members, be submitted for approval to a Review Committee of five (5) representatives of The Congregation. The Congregation's Rabbi will be one of these five (5).
  - (b) The Review Committee shall, within a period of two (2) weeks after the receipt of a maximum of forty (40) pages of double-spaced text, decide whether approval for release should be given or not, and Alan Benjamin will be informed of this decision in writing. Should approval be refused, then Alan Benjamin will be given the reason therefore. The two (2) week period can be extended directly in proportion to a larger number of pages having been submitted at one time.
  - (c) The Congregation's right of prior approval does not imply a right to academic or intellectual censorship of Alan Benjamin's writings.
  - (d) The Review Committee shall not withhold its approval in matters regarding Alan Benjamin's interpretations and/or conclusions drawn from factual information, provided those facts are verified as correct per Article two (2) above, and provided that these interpretations and/or conclusions will not, according to the Review Committee, adversely affect the reputation of any individual, organization or company which is directly or indirectly connected with The Congregation.
  - (e) The Review Committee is not required to approve term papers, proposals and/or drafts of the dissertation which Alan Benjamin will defend before an academic committee, provided that such material submitted to these parties and/or committee, shall explicitly carry the instruction that the material is "*For your eyes only.*"

- (f) Any published or publicly distributed material (including the final, bound version of Alan Benjamin's dissertation) will, however, need the prior written approval of the Review Committee of The Congregation, according to the terms of this article.
- 4 Disputes arising between parties as to whether approval rightly has been refused or not shall be submitted, solely in last resort, to binding arbitration per the following procedure:
  - (a) Each party will, within two (2) weeks of being invited to do so, appoint one (1) arbitrator. A third (3rd) arbitrator, who will also function as presiding arbitrator, will be appointed by the two (2) arbitrators.
  - (b) The presiding arbitrator shall preside at all hearings and will ensure that all proceedings are carried on in an orderly fashion.
  - (c) The arbitrators will render their decision within six (6) weeks of the time the third (3rd) arbitrator was appointed.
- 5 Should any data obtained about United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel on Curaçao be published by Alan Benjamin in violation of the terms of this contract, then he shall thereby forfeit a fine to the amount of 5,000 NAF per day payable to Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. This fine will be computed from the day of publication up to and including the day the last copy of the publication has been withdrawn.
- 6 This agreement shall be governed by the laws of the Netherlands Antilles and any disputes arising in connection with the present agreement and its implementation shall be submitted, to the exclusion of anyone else, to the cognizance of the competent court in the Netherlands Antilles.

Thus agreed and signed in duplicate on Curaçao, on

..... 1991

.....  
President(signature)

.....  
Alan Benjamin

and

.....  
Secretary (signature)

on behalf of,  
United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, Curaçao,  
Netherlands Antilles



### Research methods

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This study draws largely on material gathered during three trips to Curaçao between 1989 and 1994. In the summer of 1989, I spent six weeks on Curaçao as part of a preliminary study looking at the feasibility of doing doctoral research there, and familiarizing myself with the contemporary social setting. In January 1990, as part of a study of the synagogue building and the way it was used (Benjamin 1990), I sent a questionnaire about their synagogue building to twenty-five members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (Appendix 1). Twelve questionnaires were returned. In September 1991, I returned to Curaçao for the main portion of my research, remaining until the end of November 1992. I visited once more for a month from December 1993 to January 1994. Before, in between, and since these visits, I have corresponded with and have had occasional telephone conversations with several Curaçaoans.

My first visit included significant conversations with approximately fifty people. In the second visit, as participant-observer, I spoke with several hundred people. I also conducted a series of two semi-structured interviews. The first round involved sixty-one interviews; fifty-one of the same people were reached for the second round. These semi-structured interviews, in addition to their information-gathering purpose, served to enrich participant-observation by providing depth and an opportunity to verify my understandings. They also enabled me to become acquainted with a broader spectrum of the Curaçaoan Jewish community.

Participant-observation (Bernard 1988; Crane and Angrosino 1984; Ely *et al.* 1991; Peacock 1986) is a method of social and cultural research that involves becoming systematically engaged with those one is studying over an extended period of time (often around one year in duration). In this practice, one attempts to live like those one is studying while simultaneously noting behaviors and understandings in a manner not unlike a naturalist. One attempts to “participate” and to “observe” – to participate as an insider and to observe as an outsider. This time-tested method of research successfully enables one to grasp insights into local/private/other knowledge, understandings, and behaviors (e.g., Heilman 1986); as I noted in my fieldnotes, it is “an impossible task that is as simple as living.” Though time-tested, participant-observation is an imperfect research method, replete with paradoxes. Its contributions are great and its pitfalls many.

As participant-observer, I engaged in a wide variety of activities and kept a journal of my observations and interpretations. As part of learning about everyday experience, among other things, I shopped for an apartment, a car, clothes, and groceries; took care of car and computer repairs; learned the bus routes; lived in several different areas of the island; opened a bank account; obtained telephone

service (not a small achievement); and held frequent conversations with the immigration authorities about my visa – which, though approved earlier, I received about eight months after arriving in Curaçao. I spent hours watching people in *Punda*, watched Curaçaoan television, read Curaçaoan Papiamentu-language newspapers, collected Curaçaoan music, went to nightclubs and to various beaches, and “hung-out” in a working-class neighborhood and in working-class *snaks* – open-air, fast food and convenience store establishments at which people, mostly men, pass the time. In addition, I became acquainted with several working-class Curaçaoans while helping out at a local archaeological excavation.

I attended concerts of both classical and popular music, a dance performance, a comedy performance, local museums and festivals, and, of course, *karnaval* (see Chapter 5). I participated in a diplomatic reception, and in a formal dinner for a visiting scholar/diplomat. I helped people with their English, attended a conference of Caribbean archaeologists, and gave a lecture to the Society of Dutch University Women and to classes at an English-speaking private school. I drove through the countryside and up back roads, looking at dwellings, buildings, and the landscape. I went to two *tambú* concerts – performances derived from slave life in which, around the end of the year, people and conditions are satirized.

In short, I participated in a wide variety of activities. I attempted to learn about the public context in which more personally significant social relations occur; and to note conventions, understandings, and patterns to be found in social relations. In addition, as a “participant,” I attempted to gain a sense of the local experience, with the expectation that by personally incorporating local experience I would better be able to “translate” that experience to readers.

In addition, I was a participant-observer of specifically Jewish Curaçaoan life. I attended services twice weekly at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel for six months, then about two or three times a month for eight months. I also went there for almost all Jewish holidays (see Chapter 6). About halfway through fieldwork I began attending services at Congregation Shaare Tsedek more frequently than previously, about once or twice a month, usually on Friday evenings. On Jewish holidays celebrated for two days, I usually attended services at Congregation Shaare Tsedek on the second day (see Chapter 8). I was invited by the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Sisterhood to attend their community *seder* (literally “order,” a worship service before and after a meal to commemorate the Jewish Exodus from Egypt) on the first night of Passover, 1992, and to the home of a family from Shaare Tsedek for the second night. I was called for an *aliyah* (literally an “ascension,” in which a blessing is said before reading a portion of the *Torah*) and for other ritual “honors” several times in both congregations. In 1989, I delivered a paper during Friday night services to Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, and while the rabbi of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel was on vacation, during the summer of 1992, I read the weekly *Torah* portion in Hebrew for the congregation.

I witnessed one *brit mila* (a ritual circumcision performed on the 7th day after Jewish males are born); two *b'nei mitzvah*; a Jewish wedding; two bachelor parties for Jewish grooms; and too many Jewish funerals – at one of which I was a

pallbearer. I helped to chaperon the Curaçaoan Jewish high-school-age youth group – a local chapter of the *B'nai B'rith Youth Organization* (BBYO) – during an overnight camp-out, and spoke to them about anthropology at a regular meeting. I graciously was invited to attend birthday parties and holiday gatherings at the homes of Curaçaoan Jews and non-Jewish Curaçaoans, and hosted my own birthday party, reciprocating some of my invitations. I hosted two receptions after Saturday morning services at Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel – one after our contract was signed, and one prior to my November 1992 departure. Finally, I was welcomed into homes for innumerable informal social visits with non-Jewish and Jewish Curaçaoans.

For the semi-structured interviews, I used a set of prepared questions – though the questions were not always asked using precisely the same wording. They largely were open-ended – that is, the questions afforded interviewees the possibility of responding from their own perspectives, according to their own understanding of the issues I raised. I would then respond with further questions in order to better understand the interviewee's thinking. The further along I was in my fieldwork and the more socialized I became, the better able I became to ask follow-up interview questions that included probes into the details of local knowledge and local customs. However, I never pressed an interviewee for a response to a question she or he did not wish to answer. Many times, at the conclusion of my prepared questions, we further discussed some of the subjects raised during the interview. These conversations were extremely rewarding. Interviewees asked about my research, commented on its purposes, returned to questions asked earlier that had piqued their interest, raised new issues that they deemed important and about which I had failed to ask, and asked for my impressions of Curaçao and Curaçaoan Jews – including my assessment of issues disputed publicly. It was interesting to note the differing directions in which the questions led. The shortest interview lasted thirty minutes, but most interviews lasted one and one-half to three hours, and one interview lasted six and one-half hours. Thus, in these “semi-structured” interviews, I allowed a great deal of scope for individual perspectives, yet followed a basic format rather than simply asking people to discuss a topic in their own way.

I sought a diverse sampling of both Jewish congregations for the semi-structured interviews. To do this, I recruited people from different extended families, with a variety of views, educational backgrounds, levels of income, and differing levels of participation in public congregational life. I also interviewed a smaller number of non-Jewish Curaçaoans living in roughly comparable social circumstances. Many of those interviewed were people with whom I had become acquainted personally, but I made a point of including interviews with others with whom I had little social interaction in an attempt to reach those who might have, from my perspective, potentially novel views and experiences. In addition, through participant-observation, I was able to learn further about the topics raised in the interviews from people I did not interview formally.

The first round of interview questions (Appendix 2) focused mainly on three topical areas: demographic information, social networks, and the holiday

celebrations most significant to those interviewed. The first two topical areas commonly provide significant insight into the structure and function of social systems. They had the additional attribute of helping me get acquainted with the people I was studying and learn about their social connections. Celebrations of holidays reflect values, identity, and social relationships. Questions about holidays helped me get to know people and to learn about some of the moments in their lives that often are significant.

Secondarily, during the first round of interviews, I inquired into people's feelings about attending religious services (see Chapter 6), as well as into a social behavior – sometimes called *nuá* – in which friction between two people is so great that formerly close friends or relatives refuse to speak with one another. I hoped that the latter line of inquiry, a look at social conflict, would aid my understanding of social relations.

In the second series of interviews (Appendix 3) I inquired into a variety of practices, understandings, activities, and attitudes that often function as markers of ethnic identity. These questions were divided into ten topical areas, though a number of questions could have been placed in more than one topical area. I also sprinkled in a few questions about topics that had piqued my curiosity but that did not relate directly to markers of ethnic identity.

The first topical area in the second series of interviews included a few questions covering general knowledge of Judaism, Curaçao, and Curaçaoan Jewish history. These were asked with the expectation that people would know about topics about which they care, because they would pay attention to those topics. The next questions asked about indicators of nationality and the strength of that affiliation. The third topical area inquired into familiarity with, and practice of, customs associated with being Curaçaoan. The extensive period of participant-observation prior to beginning the second series of interviews provided material that enabled the development of these questions. Then I asked about a variety of everyday activities in order to look for patterns that might not be associated consciously with a particular ethnic group on Curaçao. Questions from the fifth topical area dwelt with childhood in order to explore formative activities. Sixth, I looked at the permeability and variability of group boundaries – at how distinguishable people felt their group to be from other groups. Next, I looked at the related topic of kinship and at behaviors and understandings that might indicate the extent of one's attachment to extended kin. The eighth topical area was about religious affiliation and the role that one understands religion to play in life. Ninth, I focused on Jewish identification in particular; and last, I asked interviewees to describe their ethnic identity – or who they think of as “[their] people” – in their own words. (Additional comments on the second interview series are included in Appendix 3.)

Sixty-one people were interviewed in forty-four separate meetings for the first series. There were thirty-nine interview sessions for the second series, though an interview with one couple and an interview with one individual were incomplete. Some interviews were with one person at a time, while others were with married couples. Occasionally, additional family members or friends would participate in

portions of the interviews. Of the ten people not participating in the second series of interviews, one couple and two individuals refused to participate, though they were all happy to continue to speak informally with me. Two individuals had left the island, and I was unable to schedule interviews at times convenient for the spouses of four interviewees.

Usually the interviews were conducted at the home of the person being interviewed or at the person's place of business. One interview was conducted in a restaurant, and two interviews were held in an office I used at the Archaeology and Anthropology Institute of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA). I began these interviews in December 1991, three months after my arrival; they continued intermittently until November 1992.

The interviewees were adults at least 18 years old. Eight (7)<sup>1</sup> were 65 and older; 34 (28) were 40 to 64 years old; and 19 (16) were under 40 years of age. They were evenly divided by sex. Thirty-one (26) were men and 30 (25) were women. Forty-seven (40) were married, and 14 (11) were single at the time of the interview – the people in this latter group had either never married, were widowed, or were divorced. Thirty-six (31) interviewees were members of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and 21 (18) belonged to Congregation Shaare Tzedek – some of these interviewees are counted twice because they were members of both synagogues. Five (5) interviewees had converted to Judaism. I also interviewed nine (7) Curaçaoans who were not Jewish, and one (1) person who disclaims any religious affiliation. Forty (36) interviewees were born on Curaçao. Of the 21 people interviewed in the first series who were not born on Curaçao, nine were spouses of native-born Curaçaoans, eight came from long-time Curaçaoan families that at the time of the interviewee's birth were living off the island, two were brought to Curaçao as children, and two came to Curaçao independently as adults. Thus, ten of these 21 can be considered to have been socialized much like native-born Curaçaoans.

Information also was gathered in other ways. I obtained written material from the Netherlands Antilles Bureau of Statistics and from local bookstores, and conducted a limited amount of research in libraries maintained by the following organizations: the Curaçao Island Government; the University of the Netherlands Antilles; AAINA; and the S.A.L. Maduro Foundation at *Landhiis Rooi Catootje*. Anthropological colleagues at AAINA were informative, and the extensive counsel of two native-born Curaçaoan anthropologists, Rose Mary Allen and Richenel Ansano, was extremely helpful. In addition, a variety of non-Jewish Curaçaoans granted interviews about their work and their interests, and commented on my research. These include a Governor of the Netherlands Antilles, a Minister for Education of the Netherlands Antilles, a member of the Netherlands Antilles Parliament, a former Minister for Welfare in the Netherlands Antilles government, the Director of the Curaçaoan *Karnaval* Foundation, the Director of the Antillean Linguistic Institute, the Secretary-General of the Council for Cultural Cooperation of the Netherlands Antilles, a Dean and a Professor at the University of the Netherlands Antilles, a United States Consul-General to the

Netherlands Antilles, the Deputy Governor of the Netherlands Antilles and Director of the Curaçaoan Public Library, the Director of the Curaçaoan Women's Center, a Curaçaoan civil planner, a mental health counselor in the public health service, a Dutch naval chaplain, a medical researcher, a person who was raised on Saba, a person raised on Sint Eustatius, and a Curaçaoan "shaman," that is, a person who practices *brua* (Afro-Curaçaoan traditional religion). In addition, I studied Papiamentu and learned about Curaçaoan customs with Curaçaoan playwright/poet/actor/translator, Nydia Ecury.

Finally, I also conducted several lengthy interviews outside of the semi-structured interviews, with people knowledgeable in specialized areas of Jewish community life. These included a group interview with the Congregation Shaare Tsedek Board of Directors, and a group interview with a portion of the Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Board of Directors.



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# Notes

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## 1 Introduction

- 1 “Mizrahi” (translated as Eastern or Oriental) is a Hebrew-language word often used to refer to Jews from North Africa or Southwest Asia who do not have ancestors from Iberia.

## 2 Research, a contract, and representation

- 1 Contractual arrangements in which research results are reviewed prior to publication by interested parties or by those studied are not unheard of in other realms. This may happen with research performed under contract to a government agency or a private company, or with research performed for an authorized biography. Such research may or may not be proprietary. Similarly, institutions testing the effectiveness of a product or a program may desire to control access to, and the content of, their tests. These and other types of applied research are not referred to here.

## 4 Ecology and prehistory

- 1 Standard convention dates the “present” as 1950 A.D.

## 5 Selected elements of the Curaçaoan social setting

- 1 However, *karnaval* also should be seen as an opportunity and location at which participants enact many different meanings, including many different interpretations of “nation” (Cohen 1998).
- 2 Laborers is a term I use broadly to refer primarily to people who were enslaved or freed from slavery, or might be considered “working class.”
- 3 Curaçao’s role in the seventeenth century slave trade largely was as a depository. Slaves brought from Africa were “warehoused” until sold elsewhere. England took over the slave trade in 1715, and by 1730 the switch was virtually complete. The last Dutch slaver arrived in Curaçao in 1778 (Goslinga 1979).

## 6 The Sephardi Jewish presence on Curaçao

- 1 A variety of ways to describe *Sephardi* exist, indicating a lack of consensus on the topic. To simplify this variety of forms, I use Sephardi as a multiple-function word, that is, as a singular noun, a plural noun, an adjective, and the possessive form for the collective



plural. I use the term Ashkenazi in the same way. Elsewhere, the term *Chinese* is used commonly in this way, without modification. I believe that this usage has both aesthetic and functional advantages. For example, in other publications, alternatives for the plural noun include:

- (a) *Sephardim* (this uses the Hebrew declension and may be confusing for readers who do not know Hebrew);
- (b) *Sephardis* (this inelegantly mixes English-language pluralization with a Hebrew-language word);
- (c) *Sephardi's* (this is an unusual usage that separates the Hebrew from the English elements of the term, but is easily confused with the possessive form); and
- (d) *Sephardics* (this forms a plural noun from the adjective, an unnecessarily complex formation, and one for which it is difficult to find an appropriate singular noun).

Alternatives for the adjective include:

- (i) *Sephardic* (this combines Hebrew and English forms);
- (ii) *Sephardi'* (most readers will not recognize this as adjectival); and
- (iii) *Sephardi* (in English, this is the adjectival form while in Hebrew it is the form for the singular noun, as well as for the adjective).

In this volume, it should be clear that – rather than attempting to distinguish both by declension and by language – context determines the meaning to apply.

- 2 An Inquisition was a crypto-religious “trial” into charges of heresy. The public burning of heretics that sometimes followed was called an *auto-da-fé*.
- 3 “Totalitarian” in the sense that private thoughts and beliefs were considered to be appropriate realms for state control, including through state-run violent means such as torture, and in the sense that control over the thoughts and beliefs in one sphere of life was exercised in order to affect behavior in many additional spheres and by people not affected directly by state coercion. Cohen (1993:54) writes:

With its racist doctrine, the Modern Old Guard created the first modern totalitarian states. A direct line of development links inquisitorial Spain and Portugal to the totalitarianisms of the modern world, with their demands for political correctness, their efforts at thought control, their unscrupulous treatment of opposition through rigged trials, their terrorization of multitudes by the persecution of selected individuals and the heaping of obloquy upon their families, their utilization of the myth of the Enemy, which, all too often, has been the Jew, and, above all, their creation of an external definition of the Jew which has led to a variety of understandings of self-identity on the part of those who have been so defined.

- 4 The term Ashkenazi has referred to peoples of different regions, but since the eleventh century C.E. (for “Common Era,” rather than the Christian A.D. ) it has referred literally to Jews from Germany. More generally it now refers to a geographically diverse subgroup of Jews who share traditions and who mainly are from north, central, or eastern Europe (Elazar 1989a:15–17).
- 5 Walter Zenner (personal communication) sets out three ways to define Sephardi Jews. From most to least restrictive the definitions are:
  - (a) Jews from the Iberian Peninsula;
  - (b) Jews from the Middle East and many of the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea; and
  - (c) any Jew who is not an Ashkenazi Jew.
- 6 This type of intermingled system of social relations also illustrates the basis for my attempt to detach, as far as possible, the contract I signed with the Board from congregational politics (see Chapter 2).
- 7 *Haham* – literally “wise person” – is a Sephardi term for rabbi. In some Sephardi communities other than Curaçao it refers to a chief rabbi of a congregation or community. More often, including on Curaçao, *haham* is a title that indicates a high level of rabbinic education.

## 8 Alternatively Jewish, alternatively Curaçaoan

- 1 However, one non-Jewish Curaçaoan with few ties to either Jewish community used the term *polako* with little negative intent during my fieldwork. This person knew that there are two groups of Jews on Curaçao, and associated somewhat different characteristics with each, but discussed them as someone from the United States might discuss the French and the Italians – as two “nations,” each valuable in its own way, with members who have characteristics that follow distinctive national patterns.
- 2 The congregation’s name has been spelled in other ways in publications, but this was the spelling in use by the congregation during my fieldwork.
- 3 If celebrated in Israel, *Simchat Torah* will fall on the earlier day; outside of Israel, it generally is celebrated on the later date. However, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel celebrates *Simchat Torah* on the earlier date.

## 9 Ascribing identities

- 1 “Nationalistic” is a misnomer but appropriate as used here. Curaçao is only one island in the autonomous but not independent “nation” of the Netherlands Antilles. If anything, Curaçao is part of the nation called the Kingdom of the Netherlands (see the “Political organization” section of Chapter 2), but it is Curaçaoan “nationalism” rather than Kingdom nationalism that is expressed in these two examples.
- 2 Basso describes the use of elements of the physical landscape by Apache as metonyms of moral narratives – for example, viewing a particular mountain could remind one of a fabled event which occurred on that particular mountain and had a moral lesson.

## Appendix 3

- 1 { } = Comments on and explanations of a question.
- 2 [ ] = Alternative forms of question, for a different population.

## Appendix 5

- 1 The number of people in this category who participated in the second series of interviews is indicated in parentheses.



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